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Darling: Detecting the Adolescent
Female Voice through Rebellion and the
Ribald in Nabokov’s *Lolita* and
Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*

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Ribald in Nabokov’s *Lolita* and Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*



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D) Introduction

“Then, without the least warning, a blue sea-wave swelled under my heart and, from a mat in a pool of sun, half-naked, kneeling, turning about on her knees, there was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses;”¹ “fair was [she], and therewithal/ As any wesele hir body gent and small...She was ful more blissful on to see/ Than is the newe pere-jonette tree.”^{2 3} Thus the youthful embodiment of male desire first appears in the pages of *Lolita* and *The Canterbury Tales*, incarnate in two girls straddling innocence and corruption: Lo and Alisoun.

To juxtapose critically two young women at the heart of works so distanced by time seems perhaps an odd venture. As I will attempt to demonstrate below, however, this comparison is less arbitrary than it appears, and ultimately allows the reader-critic a newly nuanced view of the texts in the context of Western authorship, literature, and culture.

Chaucer and Nabokov were both criticized heavily for their *magna opera*, and both *Lolita* and the Miller’s Tale have been variously banned and challenged since their publications. In fact, *Lolita* is often read even today only at the university level, as it is still widely considered too explicit for high school children, while the Miller’s Tale is frequently omitted from studies of *The Canterbury Tales*, or ‘translated’ into a more ‘acceptable’ form for young students.^{4 5} Their mutually ‘explicit’ nature alone suggests that, though separated in time by more than five centuries (*The Canterbury Tales* were ‘completed’ by 1400; *Lolita* was first published in 1955) these two works – and their authors – have more in common than one might surmise.

The reader of this paper will note that I have glossed Chaucer’s text myself. This has greatly aided my interpretation and use of his words, and does, I think, show through in the way I have made use of his text in the argument that follows. The reader will also note my extensive use of the Italian word *fanciulla*, roughly translatable as ‘girl-child,’ which I have employed in an attempt to succinctly capture and refer to the tension both Lo and Alisoun demonstrate between sexual naïveté and precociousness. The texts both begin at the moment in which Lo and Alisoun are pushed into the world of sexually mature relationships, and, despite being covered over by layers of masculine narration and reported speech, their confusion over their own sexual power still stains the texts, and their personalities still adamantly struggle to emerge.

This struggle is a result of the careful process of codification on the parts of Chaucer and Nabokov, and the narrative and stylistic methods they apply to the *fanciulle*. Both slather three layers of male narration atop the young female figure, literarily burying her alive, and seemingly blocking her voice and agency from the reader. These narrators then craftily employ selective storytelling, wordplay, and deceitful description in order to heighten the codification of the female, forcing the reader to rely on reported speech in order to view her. This distances her from the reader, and causes at least a preliminary identification with the male narrators and their viewpoint.

The reader, however, is soon forced beyond the role of voyeur. The male narrators, though clearly entranced and fascinated by the physicality and sexuality of the girls they describe, are suspiciously careful in their efforts to avoid detailed description of sexual contact with the girls. To maintain the girls’ status as objects, the narrators refer to sex instead by metaphor and allusion, interpreting it *for* the reader rather than describing it *to* him/her. To further legitimate this objectification, they candidly report with irritation and surprise the vulgarity of the girls’ language and actions. For the narrators, veiling the nature of sexual contact and pointing to the girls’ unsavory displays of character would seem to justify their actions and attitudes to the reader. The reader, however, deprived of the ‘naughty bits’ s/he expected, and privy instead to the explicit

¹ Vladimir Nabokov (Alfred Appel, Jr., ed.), *The Annotated Lolita* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) 39,

² Geoffrey Chaucer (Larry D. Benson, ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer*. 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987) ll. 125-6, 139-40.

³ “She was fair, with a body lithe and measured as a weasel...She was even more pleasant to look at than the pear’s sapling.”

⁴ “2005 Banned Books,” [Online Computer Library Center](http://www.oclc.org/research/top1000/banned.htm), 10 Dec. 2005 <www.oclc.org/research/top1000/banned.htm>

⁵ Herbert N. Foerstel Greenwood. *Banned in the USA: A Reference Guide to Book Censorship in Schools and Public Libraries* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002) 99-100.

relation of the ribald, can no longer maintain the role of voyeur, but is driven instead to puzzle out this odd narrative combination detectively. Here lies a fascinating link between these two 'illicit' texts – both represent a kind of 'detective' genre, in that they ask the reader, through the 'clues' the authors provide from the mouths of their narrators, to pursue the role of detective in order to eventually gain a clear view of the female character.

Through all the murky metaphors and clever word-games that codify the girls' emotions and sexual experiences with the men who imprison, objectify, and use them for their sexuality, the ribald is clearly discernible. For the detective reader, it becomes the code language of self-assertion, increasingly telling of the voice of each young woman as an individual, her anger and confusion, and her desperation to express emotion about the situation in which she finds herself.

If the reader processes the text detectively, rather than voyeuristically, in a sense, the male narrative scheme backfires. The ribald offers a loophole in the power of the male gaze, a loose thread in the fabric of desire, otherwise so obsessively designed, and one the reader may use to unravel the layers of lies in which the authors have wrapped the girls. As readers, rather than pushing the texts away as 'dirty' or 'inappropriate,' we must be willing to be seduced by them, for we can then use the girls' disturbing language and sexuality to better understand them and the environments in which they exist as characters.

The value of comparing these two ostensibly disparate texts lies here. If we do not allow our shock to cause a dismissal of *Lolita* and the *Miller's Tale*, but instead carefully explore them, we can learn something about ourselves as consumers of text. The comparison does not prove a singular or even direct connection between the two works, but it does encourage us to consider the way that readership and authorship function within our culture. The male voices in each text describe the past in layers, and do so through the lens not only of their gender, but of their own fickle memories as well, suppressing the *fanciulla's* self-expression. Yet if we are careful readers, we find embedded in these works girls struggling to be free of their male narrators, brilliantly codified by their authors to express their pain, their humanity, and their longing to assert themselves and to alter their position in life. It is the reader's obligation to unpack these encoded objects of desire in order to discover the complexity, desire, and intelligence of their suppressed spirits.

II) Narratological Encipherment

The structure and depth of male narration serve as important devices for the codification of the female character in both *Lolita* and the *Miller's Tale*. If, as Mieke Bal argues in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, "the identity of the narrator, the degree to which and the manner in which that identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied lend the text its specific character,"⁶ then an examination of the multiple narrators and their masculinity in both texts is of considerable import. The narrator(s) serve(s) as the lens through which the author refracts his or her literary intent, and the narrative voice(s) color(s) all other characters and voices in the text. Let us first examine the depth of narrative created in both texts, then the individual male narrators themselves, and finally, the structure and selection of their narratives.

i) Narratorial Multiplicity and Concentricity

Of primary importance in both cases is the selection of multiple layers of narration, which allows for the focalization of Lo and Alisoun. I borrow the term 'focalization' from Bal to describe "the relationship between the 'vision,' the agent that sees, and that which is seen."⁷ The term is versatile, suggesting a strong relationship between the various narrative elements of a text, and can be used to describe the focalizer (the voice of narration), the focalized (the object of narration), or the focalization of a situation, character, or actant overall.⁸

⁶ Mieke Bal. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997) 19.

⁷ Bal 104.

⁸ Bal 102.

Applying the notion of focalization to the layers of narrators in *Lolita* and the *Canterbury Tales* reveals the importance of multiple *raconteurs* to the codification and detective nature of the texts. Because there are three levels of narration in each text by which the reader is separated from the *fanciulla*, there are also three levels of focalization, and therefore three levels of distortion that the reader must decrypt.

If I may playfully refer to Humbert Humbert’s two selves as Humbert the Halcyon and Humbert the Handcuffed (names H.H. might have created for himself), the separate focalization of Dolores Haze by these two characters becomes clearer. Nabokov, as author, creates ‘a’ narrator, Humbert Humbert, who, while on trial after the murder of Quilty (Humbert the Handcuffed), tells the story of his earlier self (Humbert the Halcyon), who in turn narrates the words and actions of Lolita. Humbert the Handcuffed is the older, at least professedly repentant professor, and stands in contrast to his own younger self, hubristic and in blissful possession of little Lolita – and this self we may refer to as Humbert the Halcyon.

Similarly, Chaucer creates among his pilgrim party a Narrator who records the Miller’s Tale, which is related to him by the Miller in order to describe the story of the young Alisoun. As will be evident, the Miller’s and the Narrator’s motivations, like those of Humbert’s two selves, play a role in determining the manner and mode in which the Miller’s Tale is told.

It is important to note that these narrators focalize not only the *fanciulle*, who will be the focus of this paper, but also the men around them. This means that the men around Lo (Quilty in particular), and those around Alisoun (namely John, Nicholas, and Absolon), are also focalized by the narrators. However, as will be discussed below, this focalization is achieved and related differently because of the gender of the narrators.

Thus, beginning with the objects of focalization, the girls (and the other men around them), we can move outward narratologically to designate tertiary, secondary, and primary narrators. We can describe Humbert the Halcyon and the Miller, who are closest to the events of the text in that they directly describe the *fanciulle* and the men around them, but furthest from the reader in space-time and textual control, as tertiary narrators. The Narrator of the *Tales* and Humbert the Handcuffed, then, are secondary narrators, relating a tale through one narrator to another, and the authors themselves are primary narrators, furthest from the events of the text, but designing and ultimately controlling the narrative experience of the reader *in toto*. For clarity, I present the following table:

<u>Text:</u>	<u>Primary Narrator:</u>	<u>Secondary Narrator:</u>	<u>Tertiary Narrator:</u>	<u>Object(s):</u>
<i>Lolita</i>	Nabokov	Humbert the Handcuffed	Humbert the Halcyon	Lo (and Quilty)
<i>Canterbury Tales</i>	Chaucer	Narrator	Miller	Alisoun (and John, Nicholas, and Absolon)

In both cases, then, the author employs several distortional lenses of male narration to create a concentricity of perception; that is, the reader is closest in reception of information to the primary narrator and furthest in perception from the female character, yet the female character is arguably the central figure in both texts.

This literary *mise en abîme* structure is figuratively much like the artistic tradition for which it is named, in which, in traditional coats-of-arms, successively smaller shields are displayed within larger ones, and all fit into the quadrants of the primary shield. In this structure, one is made to view the shields (or narrative layers, as it were) successively, so that the smallest shield, which lies at the very heart of the piece, can only be seen in its own right after it is first viewed as something that lies within the bounds of the other shields. In the case of this reading, it is Lo and Alisoun who form those smallest shields, not only difficult to read because they are placed within three larger frames of narrative, but because they are hyper-focalized and distorted as well.

Each of these *raconteurs* can be deemed a separate narrator if and only if the reader can discern and justify a separation of experience and motivation between the tellings of their tales. In *Lolita*, what is apparently a unity of narratology must, in reality, be carefully dissected. One must first consider that Nabokov serves as primary narrator of the text, for although he is perhaps the most invisible of the three narrators, and “although the novel is a memoir narrated in the first person,” as Julia Bader asserts in *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov’s*

English Novels, “there are themes and revelations of which Humbert is not fully in control.”⁹ Thus all that we hear of Humbert the Halcyon has been filtered through the memoirization of Humbert the Handcuffed and through Nabokov as well. This is especially evident in circumstances concerning the names of places or persons in the novel. When, near the end of *Lolita*, Lo mentions that ‘everyone always’ called Quilty “Cue” (phonetically, Q), Humbert the Handcuffed immediately thinks of “her camp five years ago” – Camp Q – “curious coincidence.”¹⁰ While the reader is always wary of the criminal’s credibility, aware that he has changed the names of nearly everything in his ‘memoir,’ H.H. normally admits readily (and with some pride!) to such changes, as when he addresses Lolita towards the end of the novel, and writes, “I have camouflaged everything, my love.”¹¹ The instance of Camp Q, then, seems to stand out as a Nabokovian naming.

Undoubtedly, Nabokov is most visible as a narrator in the clues he leaves his reader as to the control and authorship of the text. The ties he provides between the Forward to the novel, written by the fictitious John Ray, Jr., and the text of the novel, which is Humbert’s faux journal, remind the reader that it is Nabokov, not H.H., who is ultimately in control of the work. In the Forward, Nabokov mentions the character Vivian Darkbloom, who appears referentially in the novel as a playwright and mistress to Humbert’s enemy (Quilty, a.k.a. “Q” or “Cue”), but whose name is also an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov’s own.¹² Because Nabokov considered publishing *Lolita* anonymously for a time, the embedding of some version of his name in the text was important because it would have provided him with the option of someday proving his authorship.¹³ Humorously, he adds in the Forward that Darkbloom “has written a biography, ‘My Cue,’ to be published shortly, and critics who have perused the manuscript call it her best book.”¹⁴ This coded ‘signature’ of Nabokov’s allows him to discreetly praise his own ‘great American novel,’ but also cleverly anticipates with sarcasm the criticism that would surely come with the publication of such a controversial work. Also in the Forward is Blanche Schwarzmänn, whose name, meaning ‘white-black,’ is mirrored near the very end of Humbert’s account in Melanie Weiss’ name, meaning ‘black-white.’¹⁵ Such names and references create connections between the Forward and the ‘memoir’ that only Nabokov himself could control.

The assertion of authorship extends into Nabokov’s use of lepidopteran references as well, which are inserted into the minor character and place names in the book. Here lies the second important instance of Nabokovian control over names, as mentioned above, for, while Humbert the Handcuffed is responsible for much of the nomenclatural manipulation in the book, Nabokov always emphasized, in the commentary he offered on the novel, that the lepidopterous references were authorial, and not Humbertian:

H.H. knows nothing about Lepidoptera. In fact, I went out of my way to indicate [p.110 and 157] that he confuses the hawkmoths visiting flowers at dusk with ‘gray hummingbirds.’¹⁶

Nabokov’s trademark interest in Lepidoptera, as well as his own puns, which triumph over Humbert’s in their power to supercede and unify the work, signal his importance as the ultimate focalizer and narrative puppeteer. With subtlety and self-awareness, then, Nabokov asserts his authorship and control over the text as the ultimate narrator, responsible not only for the creation of Humbert and Humbert, but indeed, for their duplicitous representations of Lo.

I use ‘their’ because Humbert can textually be divided into two distinct selves, as mentioned above. The struggle between Humbert the Handcuffed’s memoirial presentation and selective storytelling and

⁹ Julia Bader. *Crystal Land: Artifice in Nabokov’s English Novels* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1972) 57.

¹⁰ Nabokov 276.

¹¹ Nabokov 267.

¹² Appel in Nabokov 323.

¹³ Appel in Nabokov 313.

¹⁴ Nabokov 4 (emphasis mine).

¹⁵ Nabokov 5, 32.

¹⁶ Nabokov 327 (qtd. by Appel).

Humbert the Halcyon's experience of life before and during his 'Lolita era' shows through the fabric of the text continuously. Humbert, when on trial, even admits this of himself, saying,

When I try to analyze my own cravings, motives, actions and so forth, I surrender to a sort of retrospective imagination, which feeds the analytic faculty with boundless alternatives, and which causes each visualized route to fork and re-fork without end in the maddeningly complex prospect of my past.¹⁷

A discussion of the encipherment of the life lived by Humbert the Halcyon and the instances of Humbert the Handcuffed's narrative breakdown will be the subject of a later section. At this point it will be sufficient to note that Humbert the Handcuffed wishes, however he tries to convince us otherwise, to describe the past in a way that will allow him to romanticize his own experience, to create sympathy among the jury members, and to "manipulate his readers," and indeed, he succeeds in this at times.¹⁸ The generation of such sympathy and understanding in the reader necessitates a separation in Humbert between past and present, real and remembered, accurate and advantageous. The creation of the 'memoir' affords Humbert the Handcuffed the opportunity to divide himself into a former and a current self, and as David Packman argues in *Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire*, "for all intents and purposes, there are actually two Humberts: the protagonist and the narrator."¹⁹

As if to let us in on this duplicity from the start, this double narrator calls himself Humbert Humbert. In an interesting example of Humbert the Handcuffed's readiness to admit his alterations, he tells the reader some of the other names he considered for himself— all iterative and alliterative — such as " 'Otto Otto' and 'Mesmer Mesmer' and 'Lambert Lambert,' " but thinks that 'Humbert Humbert' "expresses the nastiness best."²⁰ So it is that even in this seeming *non sequitur*, which serves purportedly as a mere explanation of his pseudonym, two-faced Humbert Humbert wants us to give him credit for this 'admission' of nastiness, and to separate his older, repentant self from the horrible criminal he was before. Thus three men — two Humberts and Nabokov himself, hide little Lolita from us.

Chaucer, too, participates as narrator of his own text, and does so perhaps more explicitly than does Nabokov. In the first place, the identity of Chaucer's Narrator is more ambiguously separate from Chaucer than Humbert is; while we are never meant to confuse Nabokov and H.H., the Narrator of the *Tales* is never officially given an identity separate from Chaucer's own. In fact, the Narrator tells the Tale of Melibee and the Tale of Thopas and is sometimes addressed by the Hooste as 'Chaucer.' Because of this, we might, with good reason, read the General Prologue of the *Tales* as if Chaucer himself had participated in the pilgrimage. Yet as is the case with Humbert and Humbert, the reader must delicately separate Chaucer from his Narrator, for, in the end, Chaucer differentiates himself from his Narrator extratextually.

In his Retraction, Chaucer at first seems to insist on having merely recorded, rather than spun, the *Tales*, and denies responsibility for their explicit nature to his readership:

...if ther be any thyng that displese hem, I preye hem also that they arrette it to the defaute of myn unkonnyng, and nat to my wil, that wolde ful fain have seyde bettre if I hadde had konnyng.^{21 22}

Yet Chaucer goes on to change his tack, clearly admitting authorship of the narrative by claiming to have created it with moral instruction in mind: "oure book seith, 'Al that is writen is writen for oure doctrine,' and

¹⁷ Nabokov 13.

¹⁸ Bader 58.

¹⁹ David Packman. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Structure of Literary Desire* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982) 32.

²⁰ Nabokov 308.

²¹ Chaucer 328.

²² "If there is anything that displeases [the reader], I beg them to attribute it to the fault of my callowness, and not to my will, which would have written it more suitably if had only known better."

that is myn entente.”²³ ²⁴ Here Chaucer implies that he has created and written the *Tales* with the intention of teaching others a moral lesson, a laughable claim, but one that does ultimately cause him to own up to their writing. The conflict between Chaucer’s authorial ‘signature’ and his denial of responsibility is not unlike Nabokov’s, and like ‘Vivian Darkbloom,’ too, Chaucer humorously toots his own horn, falsely apologizing in the Retraction for *all* of his works, allowing him to publicize everything he has written to his readers in hopes that he might further his fame and fortune.

It is because of Chaucer’s eventual admission of authorship that I have given him a narrative identity distinct from that of his Narrator, for unlike Chaucer, the Narrator never takes responsibility for the *Tales*. In fact, in the prologue to the Miller’s Tale, which is a significantly more risqué story than most of the others, the Narrator fervently insists that he merely repeats what he has heard from the Miller:

M’athynketh that I shal reherce it heere.
And therefore ever gentil wight I preye,
For Goddes love, demeth nat that I seye
Of yvel entente, but for I moot reherce
Hir tales alle, be they bettre or worse...²⁵ ²⁶

The Narrator’s seeming fear of the taboo forces the reader to consider the possibility that the Narrator may have altered, censored, or otherwise changed the Miller’s Tale, although there is nothing in the text to assist the reader in discerning whether or not this is the case. The Narrator’s function and desire, though, is to relate what he has seen, and despite his frequent expressions of concern with the reception of the *Tales*, especially crass ones such as the Miller’s, the reiteration of his desire to merely ‘reherce’ the stories and the inclusion of the several ‘naughty bits’ in the story suggest that despite this fear, the Narrator has at least attempted to relate the story as he has heard it.

The language of apology used by the Narrator above mirrors Chaucer’s at the start of his Retraction, but rather than own and excuse his authorship as Chaucer does, the Narrator places the burden of responsibility on the reader instead:

And therefore, whoso list it nat yheere
Turne over the leef and chese another tale;
For he shal fynde ynowe, grete and smale,
Of storial thyng that toucheth gentillesse,
And eek moralitee and hoolynesse.
*Blameth nat me if that ye chese amys.*²⁷ ²⁸

Here, the response to the problem of the offensive nature of the Miller’s Tale is to give the reader fair warning of its content and to encourage him/her not to read further if s/he has any qualms about its objectionable content. The Narrator, though, as someone who has himself found the tale interesting enough to repeat, must necessarily be aware that such a warning only heightens the reader’s desire to continue. Thus the warning serves to emphasize the *reader’s* baseness – not only was s/he given fair warning not to read the tasteless tale, but the Narrator predicts, by his very inclusion of the tale, that the sinful desire to consume ‘the forbidden’ will

²³ Chaucer 328.

²⁴ “[The Bible] says, ‘all that is written is written for our instruction,’ and this is my intent.”

²⁵ Chaucer ll.3170-4.

²⁶ “I think I shall repeat [the Miller’s Tale] here. So I beg every noble soul, for the love of God, not to judge that I profess evil, for I only repeat all their tales, for better or for worse...”

²⁷ Chaucer ll.3176-81 (emphasis mine).

²⁸ “So anyone who finds [the thought of such a tale] displeasing, here turn the page and choose another tale, for you shall find enough, great and small, in this historical tale, to upset nobleness and any sense of morality or holiness. Do not blame me if you make the wrong choice.”

win out over the compulsion to continue on to 'the moral.' In this sense, Chaucer and his Narrator, though seemingly similar, are importantly distinct in their functions as tale-tellers. While Chaucer claims to have written the tales to educate his reader, the Narrator succeeds in passing judgment on the reader by alerting him/her to the nature of his/her desires and forcing him/her to confront his/her own motivations as a consumer.

Yet if the distinction between Chaucer and his Narrator is much like that between Nabokov's two Humberts (foggy at times, but ultimately important), that between the Narrator and the Miller is far clearer, as they are two distinct individuals making the pilgrimage to Canterbury. While the Narrator serves as the omniscient relater of all of the *Tales*, including his own, the Miller relates only his own tale – that of John, Nicholas, Absolon, and Alisoun – to the other pilgrims. The reader quickly becomes aware, too, that the Miller has compelling motivations for telling his tale, and for telling it in the way that he does.

The Miller is first presented to the reader in the General Prologue, and here the Narrator sketches a rather unappealing character, brawny and stout, with a warty nose, covered, he says, with nasty hairs as bristly as those on a sow's ears.²⁹ Yet the Narrator also refers – rather reluctantly – to the Miller's cleverness, noting that "Wel koude he stelen corn and tollen thries,"^{30 31} and pronouncing him "a janglere and a goliardeys,"^{32 33} really capable of entertaining others with his tales. This ability to divert and to deceive serves the Miller well in the tale-telling contest of the pilgrimage, for at stake for the winner is not only the prize of the free meal, but also the dignity and the feeling of general superiority that must accompany the victory.

The Miller does seem to feel that his masculinity is on the line, and proves especially competitive with the Reeve. As he begins his tale, which just *happens* to concern a cuckolded carpenter, the Reeve exclaims, "Stynt thy clappe!"^{34 35} and reprimands the Miller for proposing the telling of such a tale, which would be "a synne and eek a greet folye."^{36 37} Of course, the pilgrims all enjoy the Miller's Tale very much, and "loughe and pleyde"³⁸ at its end – all except the Reeve, who begins his own tale with bitterness towards the 'proud' Miller and a craving for retribution.³⁹ This rivalry between the Miller and the Reeve necessarily colors the tale, for the Miller's need to defend his pride and masculinity only heightens the particularly masculine slant with which he tells the story of Alisoun and her lovers.

Though the separation between secondary and tertiary narrators is clearer in the Miller's Tale than in *Lolita*, the refraction of memory is similar – the memory of the Miller is related to the Narrator, who must then be trusted to relate it faithfully to Chaucer, who relates it to us. It would seem that an important outstanding difference between the two, then, would be that *Lolita* is told from a first-person perspective, while The Miller's tale is not. Interestingly, though, Bal argues that the difference between first- and third-person narratives is slight. Because in either case the focalization of the object considered is still based on the motivation of the narrator, "in principle, it does not make a difference to the status of the narration whether a narrator refers to itself or not."⁴⁰ It is the focalization of the object by these narrators that matters most.

This is not to say that the difference between first- and third- person narration is not felt by the reader, or that it has no bearing on his/her reaction to the text, but rather that both involve a narrator similarly capable of transmitting his own motivations through the tale he tells. Thus though Humbert's two 'I's' are so

²⁹ Chaucer ll.545-56.

³⁰ Chaucer l.562.

³¹ "He could skillfully steal grain and charge [customers] thrice"

³² Chaucer l.560.

³³ "A risqué storyteller and comedian"

³⁴ Chaucer l.3144.

³⁵ "Shut up!"

³⁶ Chaucer l.3146.

³⁷ "A sin and a silliness"

³⁸ "Laughed amusedly"

³⁹ Chaucer ll.3858-66.

⁴⁰ Bal 121.

explicitly the eyes through which the reader views *Lolita*, the effect of using third-person narration interspersed with ‘I’s’ in the Miller’s Tale is essentially equivalent narratologically.

The eyes of narration in *Lolita* and the *Tales*, however, are not only multiple, but arranged concentrically. The *mise en abyme* structure of storytelling has a profoundly compounded effect on the focalization of the object, because rather than facing heteroglossia – that is, the reception of multiple, distinct voices – the reader is instead confronted with the difficulty of having to hear each voice by unearthing it first from the one suppressing it. This is evidenced by the narrators’ relation of speech and information to the reader – the more narrators separating the reader from the object, the more opportunity there is for the distortional focalization of that object through description, stylization, and the interpretation of her words and actions.

Bal gives a simplistic example of this phenomenon, and although in her discussion of the issue, the point made is that *one* of these levels will be used (usually consistently) in a narrative, I think an examination of the spectrum of credibility by distance she offers aptly reflects the concentricity and combination of distortion visible in the narration of *Lolita* and the *Tales*. I reproduce it here, adding the correlative levels of narration for the two texts:⁴¹

<u>Level of Narration</u>	<u>Type/ of Speech</u>	<u>Example</u>
<u>Object</u> (Lo/Alisoun)	Direct Speech	E. said, “I refuse to go on living like this.”
<u>Tertiary Narrator</u> (Humbert the Handcuffed/Narrator)	Indirect Speech	E. said that she would not go on living like that.
<u>Secondary Narrator</u> (Humbert the Halcyon/Miller)	Free Indirect Discourse	E. would be damned if she’d go on living like this.
<u>Primary Narrator</u> (Nabokov/Chaucer)	Narrator’s Text	E. did not want to go on living in [that manner].

For Bal, the distinction between direct and indirect speech has not only to do with the obvious removal of quotation marks, but with the change in style this removal allows. The impact and slant of the statement is now in control of the tertiary narrator. This means that there is then even greater room for interpretation and change between the tertiary and secondary levels of narration, and indeed, in this example, the declarative verb is removed and a strong new stylistic change of volition – ‘damned if’ – is introduced. By the time this adaptation reaches the most basic, simplified, and distanced level of narration – that of the author – the statement seems paraphrastic and temporally remote in comparison to the sentence originally uttered by the object.

Of course, the example sentence Bal gives might have been morphed in multiple other ways at each level, but this only strengthens Bal’s point – once the control leaves the object, each level of distance by narration thereafter poses a further challenge to the reader in terms of reception of the object’s voice and feeling. At each level, the *fanciulla* is molded successively into something that reflects her less than it reflects each concentric narrator’s own focalization of her.

ii) Narratorial Masculinity: The Effect of the Male Voice on Descriptive Coding

In *Lolita* and the Miller’s Tale, the nature of this focalization has everything to do with the gender and sexuality of the narrators, for in both texts, the primary, secondary, and tertiary narrators are all male and, it seems, heterosexual. While Bal does not address the issue of gendered narratives, I will venture to make the claim here that if the distinction between a first- and a third-person narrator can essentially be discounted because the content remains similar between the two, that between distinctly gendered narrators cannot, as their attached sexuality alters the manner in which they focalize their object(s).

⁴¹ Bal 141-2.

The difference between the way the male narrators describe the *fanciulle* and report their speech and the way they view other men makes this point remarkably clear. Description is used heavily in both texts: for Chaucer, it serves as a way of elaborating and complexifying the fabliau form and its characters; for Nabokov it plays an important role in his self-admitted obsession with aesthetics and folly in literature.

In *Lolita*, the descriptive and emotive worship lavished on Lo is a relentless reminder of the gender and attached desire of the narrator(s). Excepting the criticisms leveled at Lo's vulgarity, which will be discussed below, Humbert cannot describe a moment of Lo's life in less than lusting terms. Each sentence is laden with rhythmic odes to her "bangs and the swirls at the sides and the curls at the back, and the sticky hot neck,"⁴² so entranced is H.H. by the "healthy heat which like summer haze hung about little Haze."⁴³ In the "burnished mist"⁴⁴ through which he sees her, Lo's scabs are "tiny dotted lines of coagulated rubies"⁴⁵ and even the aftermath of her tears is "morbidly alluring," for Humbert "simply love[s] that tinge of Botticellian pink, that raw rose about the lips, those wet, matted eyelashes."⁴⁶ These descriptions of lithe, lachrymal Lo paint her not as a loved little girl, but as an object of male desire.

In the Miller's Tale, too, the fetishization of Alisoun occurs not only by her lovers, John, Nicholas, and Absolon, but by the Miller himself. In describing the desire the others harbor for her, the Miller indulges his own passion for Alisoun, calling her "fair...and therwithal/ As any wesele hir body gent and small," and devoting over a dozen lines to a detailed description of her dress.⁴⁷ This description, too, focuses on the way her clothes cling to her form – such as the "barmcloth as whit as morne milk/ Upon hir lendes, ful of many a goore."⁴⁸ ⁴⁹ In *The Narrative Art of The Canterbury Tales*, Ian Bishop argues that the Miller's Tale is one of only two that subverts the fabliau form, which is normally "swift-moving and brief," by "using substantial descriptions" to "make poetry out of the humble, unremarkable objects of everyday life."⁵⁰ Interestingly, Alisoun is variously focalized – she is compared to the fruition of flora and fauna, but also to various objects that are creations of man, such as dolls and coins.⁵¹ This contrast between the natural and the artificial, the organic and the metallic, is essential to the codification of the female as both temptress and plaything, a notion I will return to later in discussing youth and sexuality.

Hence the male gender and attached heterosexuality of the narrators influences the focalization of the objects, so that descriptions of Lo and Alisoun actually function as tools for enciphering and overpowering the female voice in the texts. The reader, too, may be easily seduced by these heavy layers of description, receiving them without realizing immediately the powerful, distortional effect they have on his/her perception of Lo and Alisoun. Bal writes that looking, and, despite gendered distinction, gazing, are "the most effective, the most frequent, and the least noticeable form[s] [of descriptive motivation]."⁵² What the reader may at first accept as an objective description of something turns out to be often not only subjective, but willfully distortional. As Bal notes, "[w]hen a character not only looks but also describes what it sees, a certain shift in motivation occurs."⁵³ In the narrators' descriptions of the girls, this is especially true, for the reader has no access even to physical descriptions of them through a view that is free of sexual motivation. The extent to which such descriptions of Lo and Alisoun lie in contrast to descriptions of the other focalized objects of the texts – that is,

⁴² Nabokov 65.

⁴³ Nabokov 59.

⁴⁴ Nabokov 58.

⁴⁵ Nabokov 111.

⁴⁶ Nabokov 64.

⁴⁷ Chaucer ll.3233-4

⁴⁸ Chaucer ll.3236-7.

⁴⁹ "An apron white as morning's milk upon her loins, all flounced"

⁵⁰ Ian Bishop. *The Narrative Art of The Canterbury Tales: A Critical Study of the Major Poems* (London: The Guernsey Press Co. Ltd, 1987) 61,65.

⁵¹ Chaucer ll.3254-6.

⁵² Bal 130.

⁵³ Bal 130.

the men that surround the *fanciulle* – may clue the reader in to the distinction between the focalization of the object of desire and the homosocial object of rivalry and relatability.

If a man gazes narratively at the female object of his desire, he may be said instead to look at another man in narrating. At each narrative level, the gaze leveled at Lo and Alisoun is increasingly distortional, but looking is, too, for each narrator looks not only at the male objects surrounding the *fanciulla* he focalizes, but also at the narrator that has come before him. Thus distortion occurs, too, when one man looks at another, but the *nature* of this distortion differs. Instead of sexualizing the object, as in the cases of the *fanciulle*, the male narrator instead engages in an intra-male look of the kind described above between the Miller and the Reeve in the Miller's Prologue. The distortion in looking results not from desire, but from the tension between complicity and rivalry one man feels in looking at another man who stands, too, in proximity to the *fanciulla* – what Anne Laskaya, in her critique of the Miller's Tale entitled "Men In Love and Competition," terms "the intersection of competition and sexual desire."⁵⁴

Importantly, this complicity is not visible at the level of primary narration. One hopes, as the reader, that the authors do not feel, but rather fabricate, the interests of their secondary and tertiary narrators. And, too, as will be discussed below, the authors, as ultimate narrators, have reason for and control over the desire they create within their secondary and tertiary narrators, and it is at these levels that the tension described actually becomes visible.

At the level of secondary narration, desire is distanced. The Narrator of the *Tales* introduces the Miller to the reader with both disgust and, it seems, a twinge of envy. The Miller, though a 'cherl' and physically grotesque, is sly in the ways of the world, explicitly masculine, knows many a tale "of synne and harlotries," and can entertain the other pilgrims as both a storyteller and a musician.^{55 56} The Narrator, as his professed fear of telling the taboo and his utterly dull tales suggest, has not led the life of love and lust that the Miller has. So dull and depraved of entertainment value are the Narrator's two tales that even the Hooste begs him to stop in the midst of telling the first,

'...for Goddes dignitee,
...for thou makest me
So wery of they verray lewednesse...
Myne eres aken of they drasty speche...'^{57 58}

The Hooste's response to the Tale of Thopas lies in stark contrast to that which the Miller's Tale receives, and the poor Narrator, claiming interest merely in 'rehercing' the *Tales*, may in fact exhibit a look of longing as he relates the Miller's Tale to the reader.

In Humbert the Handcuffed's case, this distance takes the form of nostalgia – he longs for the days past, when he, Humbert the Halcyon, was free to live and do with Lo as he pleased. After Lo leaves him, Humbert longs for a letter from her, his mind playing tricks on him: "[s]everal times already, a trick of harlequin light that fell through the glass upon an alien handwriting had twisted it into a semblance of Lolita's script, causing me almost to collapse."⁵⁹ In his obsession, he keeps her possessions, writing that

[u]p to the end of 1949, I cherished and adored, and stained with my kisses and
merman tears, a pair of old sneakers, a boy's shirt she had worn, some ancient blue
jeans I found in the trunk compartment, a crumpled school cap, such wantonlike

⁵⁴ Anne Laskaya. "Men In Love and Competition: the Miller's Tale and the Merchant's Tale." *Chaucer Studies XXIII: Chaucer's Approach to Gender in the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995) 79.

⁵⁵ Chaucer ll.545-66.

⁵⁶ "of sin and harlotry"

⁵⁷ Chaucer ll.2109-2113.

⁵⁸ "For the love of God, as you make me so tired from your very ignorance [at storytelling] that my ears ache from your God-awful tale."

⁵⁹ Nabokov 262.

treasures.⁶⁰

Humbert the Handcuffed thus looks on his former self with a yearning for the past that adds to the warping of his narrative.

But it is the Miller and Humbert the Halcyon (the latter melting, at times, of course, into Humbert the Handcuffed) who, as tertiary narrators, are the most intense 'lookers' in the texts. They are most proximal to the male objects surrounding Lo and Alisoun, and they describe other men with an understanding that those men, too, cast a gaze on their girl-child.

At times, Humbert takes pride in other men's longing looks at Lo, noting, for example, "[a] lanky, six-foot, pale boy with an active Adam's apple, ogling Lo and her orange-brown midriff, which I kissed five minutes later"⁶¹ or imagining "the colorful classroom around my dolorous and hazy darling," and "there, lost in the middle, gnawing a pencil, detested by teachers, all the boys' eyes on her hair and neck, my Lolita."⁶² But over time, Humbert becomes very wary of other men being around Lo, and even rewards her with a new tennis racket when she proclaims her peers to be "the most revolting bunch of boys she ha[s] ever seen."⁶³ He tells us that "[a]bsolutely forbidden were dates, single or double or triple – the next step being of course mass orgy," and keeps Lo as much as possible under his control.⁶⁴ His focalization of Quilty, his archrival, is particularly interesting, and while he notes early on in the Haze household, on seeing a photo of Quilty taped to Lo's wall that "the resemblance [is] slight," he later retracts this admission in his jealousy.⁶⁵ Quilty does seem to resemble H.H., who (perhaps unconsciously) constantly describes his own mustache, middle-agedness, and black wardrobe, then Quilty's "damp black hair or what was left of it...his little mustache a humid smear....his tight wet black bathing trunks."⁶⁶ Humbert Humbert thus unconsciously describes Quilty in terms that make him seem similar to himself while at the same time trying desperately to distinguish himself from his doppelgänger. This intra-male rivalry establishes a distortional kind of looking between Humbert the Halcyon and his competition that undoubtedly stains his narrative.

The Miller, too, both derives satisfaction from and demonstrates envy in looking at the male objects surrounding Alisoun. He looks jealously at Absolon's gaze on Alisoun, but participates in it, too: "I dar wel seyn, if she hadde been a mous,/ And he a cat, he wolde hir hente anon."⁶⁷ Through the Miller's participation in this gaze, as Anne Laskaya points out, Alisoun becomes "the site of a struggle between men," so that "at the heart" of The Miller's Tale "is homosocial competition."⁶⁸ The Miller, in emphasizing the rivalry between John, Nicholas, and Absolon, and in describing their desire, indulges his own. In using the 'I' in his speech, too, he actually involves himself and his listener in the male gaze, making it impossible to see Alisoun without it. Like Lo under Humbert's 'Our-glass' gaze, Alisoun becomes trapped by the image the Miller gives us of her.

III) Voyeurism and Detection

This combination of looking and gazing invites the reader into an intrusive but enticing act of voyeurism, in which s/he is not only privy to the jealousy one man feels for another at each successive level of narration, s/he is also invited into a complicity with that desire, which stems from the sexualized descriptions s/he receives of the girls. In recounting and recording the female figure of each text through their lust and rivalry, the men affirm the placement of the *fanciulla* as an object ripe for fetishization – as "a prymerole, a piggesnye,/ for any lord to leggen in his bedde,/ Or yet for any good yemen to wedde."⁶⁹ ⁷⁰ This description of

⁶⁰ Nabokov 255.

⁶¹ Nabokov 157.

⁶² Nabokov 53.

⁶³ Nabokov 199.

⁶⁴ Nabokov 186.

⁶⁵ Nabokov 69.

⁶⁶ Nabokov 237.

⁶⁷ Chaucer ll.3346-7.

⁶⁸ Laskaya 78.

⁶⁹ Chaucer ll.3268-70.

Alisoun is integral to the conceptualization of the *fanciulla*, for here, Alisoun is conceived as an object that is both appealing and available to all men; she is as high in value as “the noble yforged newe,”⁷¹ ⁷² but is also equal, in base attractiveness, to the lowliest “wenche.”⁷³ *Lolita*, too, is both “wenchy” and “perilous” in her “magic.”⁷⁴ By making the female figure thus accessible and attractive to all males, she becomes, as H. Marshall Leicester, Jr., in “Newer Currents in Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Difference ‘It’ Makes: Gender and Desire in the Miller’s Tale,” notes, “the site on and for which men compete.”⁷⁵ In this way, Priscilla Martin affirms in “The Merchandise of Love: Winners and Wasters,” the *fanciulla*’s “price fluctuates,” but she is thus made available to all consumers of the text.⁷⁶

This collaborative voyeurism, founded on delectable descriptions and the excitement of male contention, is carefully cultivated, increased, and frustrated in the reader through narrative structure and verbal enciphering by wordplay. The narrators, aware of the interest they have sparked in the reader, actually encode much of their stories, especially the sexual parts. Fooling with the relation of information, changing names, punning, and essentially keeping the most intimate, salacious moments between the *fanciulle* and the men rather hidden leaves the reader at the mercy of his/her own curiosity, making him/her putty in the hands of the narrator. Bal writes that “[t]he act of speaking necessitates a listener,” so “[t]he speaker must possess knowledge which the listener *does not have but would like to have*.”⁷⁷ As the reader begins to wade through the wordplay, it becomes clear that much is being withheld. The reader seeks to experience the girl as the tale-teller has experienced her, but, due to the vagueness of his description of sexual situations, s/he cannot. This frustration forces the reader into decryption, making him/her examine the author’s modes of deception in an effort to experience the *fanciulla* more fully.

Once, however, the reader is thus involved, s/he is no longer a voyeur, but a detective, whose increasing desire to gain access to the girls is evidenced by readerly spying and code-breaking. Working detectively to discern those portions of the text enciphered by narrative structure and language stylistics truly begins to pose a challenge to the reader: while engaging in such detection makes the reader an ‘artist and a madman’ of the same caliber as those twisted male narrators themselves, refusing to read the female as the narrators want him/her to also leads the reader to a truer perception of her in the end. In order to detangle the deception, I will first examine the dual devices of deception, and will then discuss their relevance to the withheld sexual content of the texts.

IV) Devices of Deception: Narrative Structure and Language Stylistics

i) Narrative Structure

Narrative structure, as discussed above, ultimately plays a significant role in the codification of the female voice. There are very few instances of direct speech communicating anything of real importance on the part of the *fanciulle*, except in outstanding cases. Normally, direct speech is limited to the utterly inconsequential, and this is especially true of *Lolita*, which, being longer, affords Lo more direct reported speech than the Miller’s Tale allows Alisoun.

⁷⁰ “a [flower]/ for any lord to lay down in his bed/ or for any [lowly] freeman to marry”

⁷¹ Chaucer l.3256

⁷² “newly minted coin”

⁷³ Chaucer l.3254.

⁷⁴ Nabokov 204,134.

⁷⁵ H. Marshall Leicester, Jr. “Newer Currents in Psychoanalytic Criticism, and the Difference ‘It’ Makes: Gender and Desire in the Miller’s Tale.” *ELH*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (Autumn 1994) 482.

⁷⁶ Priscilla Martin. “The Merchandise of Love: Winners and Wasters.” *Chaucer’s Women: Nuns, Wives, and Amazons* (London: The Macmillan Press, Ltd., 1990) 73.

⁷⁷ Bal 130 (emphasis mine).

Direct, decent declarations from Dolores Haze include such jejune gems as, “ ‘The McCoo girl? Ginny McCoo? Oh, she’s a fright,’ ” “ ‘Say, how come you know all those kids?’ ” and “ ‘Oh, a squashed squirrel...what a shame.’ ”⁷⁸ None of these tells the reader anything about Dolly’s dreams or disposition; they only serve to remind him/her of Lo’s dialect and her age – a mere dozen years.

Sometimes these elements of direct speech, however, are accompanied in *Lolita* by interpretive indirect commentary: “ ‘Look, make Mother take you and me to Our Glass Lake tomorrow.’ These were the textual words said to me by my twelve-year-old flame in a voluptuous whisper.”⁷⁹ Here, although Dolly is quoted directly, Humbert remains in control of the tonal delivery of her demand to the reader.

Still more extreme, however, is the textual enciphering of opinions and feelings, even about minor things. For example, in describing the new wardrobe he buys for the road trip with Lo, Humbert mentions that while he purchased bathing suits “in all shades,” he did not buy her racy little slips, as the reader might imagine: “No slips, Lo and I loathed slips.”⁸⁰ Humbert imparts his opinion with certainty onto Lo, but the reader has no idea of Lo’s actual opinion on the matter.

In cases where *Lolita*’s deep-seated emotions are involved, Humbert’s interpretation is then a major block to the reader’s access to her true character. When Lo escapes Humbert’s gaze one afternoon (to meet, we later learn, with Quilty), Humbert wonders

why she did *not* go for ever that day. Was it the retentive quality of
her new summer clothes in my locked car? Was it some unripe particle
in some general plan? Was it simply because, all things considered, I
might as well be used to convey her to Elphinstone...?⁸¹

In fact, the reader at this point gets no answer, but is instead only provided with the possibilities Humbert himself posits.

Alisoun’s is an even more extreme example of narrative structure being utilized for encryption. She is granted all of ten opportunities to speak in the whole of the *Miller’s Tale*, often merely offering an agreement to something someone else has said, such as, when her husband asks whether she hears Absolon singing at their window, “Yis, God woot, John, I here it every deel,”^{82 83} or shouting “Clom!”^{84 85} along with the others during the execution of the ruse.

And, like *Lolita*, the *Miller’s Tale* gives narratological credence to Nicholas’ desire, equating it with Alisoun’s:

Nicholas shal shapen him a wyle
This sely jalous husband to bigyle;
And if so be the game wente aright,
She sholde slepen in his arm al nyght,
For this was his desir and hire also.^{86 87}

⁷⁸ Nabokov 41, 136, 140.

⁷⁹ Nabokov 45.

⁸⁰ Nabokov 107.

⁸¹ Nabokov 223.

⁸² Chaucer l.3369.

⁸³ “Yes, by God, John, I hear every bit of it”

⁸⁴ Chaucer l.3639.

⁸⁵ “Hush!”

⁸⁶ Chaucer ll.3402-7.

⁸⁷ “Nicholas would bide his time/ to trick this foolish husband/ and if the game succeeded/ [Alisoun] would be in his arms all night/ for this was his desire, and hers, too.”

Nicholas' desire is understood and shared by the tertiary narrator (the Miller), and only as a kind of side note is Alisoun said to be equally desirous. We know that at first she resisted Nicholas' advances, pulling away "as a colt dooth in the trave,"⁸⁸ and saying, "I wol nat kisse thee, by my fey!.../Lat be, Nicholas,/ Or I wol crie. 'out, harrow' and 'allas!'"⁸⁹ ⁹⁰ And though eventually we are told that Nicholas "profred him so faste,/ That she hir love graunted atte laste," it is the male desire that is prioritized narratologically.⁹¹ ⁹² Whereas many critics conclude with good reason, as Bishop does, that "their desire is mutual, spontaneous, and gratifying to them both," I would complicate this argument by suggesting that Alisoun's gratification comes not purely from physical pleasure, but also from the thrill of having rebelled against and deceived her husband.⁹³ As Laskaya points out, "[i]t is Alisoun who is copulated *with*, not Nicholas," and as I will argue momentarily, Alisoun's deceit is an act of subversion, not just sexuality.⁹⁴

The narrative structure of the texts is thus an effective tool of deception for the men: by altering the statements and feelings of the girls through increasingly distant narratological interpretation, the reader, already privy to the narrative male gaze, may be lulled into ignoring the possibility that the narrator is presenting the *fanciulla* in the way he wishes to, likely with little regard for or understanding of her actual emotions. For Humbert Humbert, 'solipsizing' Lolita by physically and descriptively possessing her provides a mode of fulfilling his long-lost lust for Annabel. Yet it also allows him to exist in the imaginary moment of his childhood (one he has worn down by remembering and re-remembering) as an imaginary version of himself. The Miller, too, 'solipsizes' Alisoun, so that she becomes the fulfillment of his fantasies, sexual and personal. Alisoun, the attractive object of desire who is able to control others with her body more easily than with her tongue, represents the Miller's total opposite, or the self he can never actualize.

ii) Language Stylistics, or Wordplay: Puns, Alliteration, and Games

Yet it is not only the structure of narration and the stylized and reinterpreted reporting of Lo and Alisoun's words, actions, feelings, and opinions that clue the reader in to the importance of decipherment in these texts. The employment of language stylistics in the two texts provides not only pleasurable detail for the reader, but a device of further deception for the author as well, and allusion, alliteration, puns, and other forms of wordplay are used extensively by the male narrators in their focalization of the *fanciulle*.

The use of wordplay in *Lolita* has been discussed elementarily with regard to the signatures Nabokov leaves throughout the book. But it is not Nabokov, as primary narrator, but rather his secondary and tertiary narrators who are visibly responsible for the majority of word-games in the text. I shall not attempt to explore the extent of wordplay in *Lolita* in this brief essay, but will rather point out examples in order to sketch its falsifying function in the narrative. In fact, so complex, frequent, and obscure is the use of wordplay in *Lolita* that it proves rather difficult to decipher it completely, even to the perspicacious reader.

Humbert admits this trickery of himself on the first page of his memoir, when he flirtingly fixes the fateful summer he met Annabel within the temporal structure of the narrative by writing, "Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style."⁹⁵ Furthermore, this relation of events, which leaves the reader reeling, directly follows a passage of concentrated alliteration and allusion, the famed first paragraph of the novel:

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta:

⁸⁸ "As a colt does in a farrier's tie"

⁸⁹ "I won't kiss you, I swear! Let me be, Nicholas, or I will cry [for help]!"

⁹⁰ Chaucer II.3284-6.

⁹¹ Chaucer I.3289.

⁹² "pressed his case so adamantly that she at last promised herself to him"

⁹³ Bishop 77.

⁹⁴ Laskaya 92.

⁹⁵ Nabokov 9.

the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.⁹⁶

These opening lines both mimic and satirize the tradition of amorous writing, but also include an allusion to Poe's poem *Annabel Lee*, which takes place in a "kingdom" – or, for Humbert, a "*princedom* by the sea."⁹⁷ For H.H. to begin his memoir in such an utterly confounding way truly prepares the reader for the rest of *Lolita*, or at least warns him/her of what s/he is up against. In the first two paragraphs, then, alliteration, allusion, and confusion have already made their debuts, and Humbert Humbert's game has only just begun.

It is worth noting that Humbert seems to have used word-games not only as a memoirist, but as his 'former self,' too, notably to elicit laughter in Lo. He recalls her favorite record, "Little Carmen," which he "used to call 'Dwarf Conductors,' making her snort with mock derision at my mock wit."⁹⁸ He also mentions " 'Monsieur Poe-poe,' as that boy in one of Monsieur Humbert Humbert's classes in Paris called the poet-poet."⁹⁹ Lo herself purportedly takes part in the fun, responding to her mother's cry of " 'Lo!' " with " 'And behold,' " and, notes Humbert Humbert, "not for the first time."¹⁰⁰ Some such clever puns, however, were likely thought up retrospectively, during the construction of the memoir, where the extreme plasticization of language baffles but bewitches the reader. Near the end of the novel, as has already been mentioned, Humbert the Handcuffed speaks through the pages to Lolita, writing, "I have camouflaged everything, my love," and the reader must feel that even this is an understatement, so mind-numbing has the journey through the landscape of language been for his detective reader.¹⁰¹

Though it is to a lesser extent, the Miller, too, makes use of wordplay in the spinning of his yarn. As a 'jangler and goliardeys,' the Miller is cleverer in his ability to entertain and encode than the reader first suspects from his grotesque introduction, and his rhythm, alliteration, and punning are telltale signs of his tale-telling skills.¹⁰² A rhythmic, alliterative tone may be found in many lines of the Tale, notably Alisoun's sing-songy " '...lat be!' quod she[,] 'Lat be...!' "¹⁰³ but there are still more explicit examples of the Miller's delight in alliteration. One of these lies in the encounter between Alisoun and Nicholas, when the reader hears that he "heeld hire harde by the haunchebones/ And seyde, 'Lemman, love me al atones...'"¹⁰⁴

Puns, too, occur with some frequency in the Miller's Tale. Some of these are used structurally, such as the 'queynte'-queynte'-queynt'-yqueynt' pun, the word implying 'clever'-cunt'-clever'-quenched' at various junctures of the narrative, and pointing to its progression.¹⁰⁵ Others serve as descriptive coding for the construction of character traits; hence, "hende Nicholas" is not only courteous, as he is when we first meet him, but charming to Alisoun, and also, more literally, 'hand-y' – as in liberal with his hands on Alisoun's body.¹⁰⁶ "Pryvetee" functions in the Tale, too, to imply not only God's mystery, but a person's private parts, and his/her actions with those parts, thus making 'sely' John still sillier.¹⁰⁷ Finally, "housbande," as Priscilla Martin points out, can mean either a married man or "a man who practices husbandry or economy," a *double-entendre* made even more interesting by her point that "the senses are synonymous only if a wife is a possession and sexuality is on ration."¹⁰⁸

⁹⁶ Nabokov 9.

⁹⁷ Appel in Nabokov 334.

⁹⁸ Nabokov 45.

⁹⁹ Nabokov 43.

¹⁰⁰ Nabokov 51.

¹⁰¹ Nabokov 267.

¹⁰² Chaucer l.560.

¹⁰³ Chaucer l. 3285.

¹⁰⁴ Chaucer 3279-80.

¹⁰⁵ Chaucer ll. 3275-6, 3605, 3754

¹⁰⁶ Chaucer ll. 3199, 3386, 3462, 3526, 3742, 3832.

¹⁰⁷ Chaucer ll. 3295, 3558.

¹⁰⁸ Martin 70.

Importantly, the structure of narration and the use of wordplay not only effectively create a smokescreen between the reader and the *fanciulla*, but also provide the narrators a gaudy distraction from the dark foundation of the plot. In “Nabokov and the Verbal Mode of the Grotesque,” Ralph A. Ciancio writes of Humbert (the Handcuffed) that

Punning shields him from the awful spectre of his bestial self and bends the focus of a banal and vulgar world...He puns in order to assuage his despair...art provides refuge, but only, we must conclude, a highly problematical one.¹⁰⁹

This may also be argued of the Miller, who sprinkles Alisoun’s story with humor and wit to conceal the potentially complex and threatening nature of her true self and her motivation. Martin acknowledges that while “the cheerfulness of the Tale depends upon no deep emotions being involved...the comic excess...produces its own complications.”¹¹⁰ The reader, increasingly detective, begins to sense that something is amiss amidst all of this wordplay. The enciphering through language stylistics, then, is not only a playful game for the narrators, as it might first appear, but a mode of tale-telling that aids in the improvement of their image to the reader by capitalizing on the consumer’s enjoyment of the comic and clever. It reduces the narrator’s responsibility and distracts the reader from what is possibly a dark mark on the story he tells.

V) The Encoded Sexual

What the veil formed by the structure of narration and the manipulation of language ultimately detracts from is the sexual. For all the openness with which each narrator professes to write or ‘reherce’ his tale, and for all the warning we receive in advance of its filthy content, the narrators withhold explicit descriptions of sex from the reader. At this point it is necessary to address the way in which sexuality is introduced into the lives of the two girls, and to discuss the importance of their youth to the textual sense of their sexuality and identity.

i) Youth and Sexuality

For Lo, the transition into sexual adulthood clearly comes prematurely, when she is orphaned at the age of twelve. Previously an adolescent with a schoolgirl crush, Lo lies suddenly at the mercy of lecherous Humbert after Charlotte’s death. The reminders of Lo’s youth are constant, not only in her diet (she “preferred the corniest movies, the most cloying fudge”) and dialect (she has a “vulgar vocabulary” that includes “ ‘revolting,’ ‘super,’ ‘luscious,’ ‘goon,’ [and] ‘drip’ ”), but also, of course, in the sexual descriptions of her that are so focalized by H.H.’s desire.¹¹¹ Humbert the Handcuffed remembers that he “derived not an exclusively economic kick from such roadside signs as, TIMBER HOTEL, Children under 14 Free,”¹¹² and later quips at Crystal Chamber, “Children under 12 free, Lo a young captive.”¹¹³ Interestingly, “the tart grace of her coltish subteens”¹¹⁴ also mirrors the Miller’s description of Alisoun, who is described as being “[w]ynsynge...as is a joly colt.”^{115 116}

Thus Alisoun, too, is conceived of in childlike, even boyish terms, though her marriage, at the age of eighteen, is not unusual for the period in which she lives. The emphasis the Miller places on her youth and

¹⁰⁹ Ralph A. Ciancio. “Nabokov and the Verbal Mode of the Grotesque.” *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Autumn 1977) 532.

¹¹⁰ Martin 78.

¹¹¹ Nabokov 166, 65.

¹¹² Nabokov 147.

¹¹³ Nabokov 157.

¹¹⁴ Nabokov 49.

¹¹⁵ Chaucer l.3263.

¹¹⁶ “as skittery as a spunky colt”

recent innocence, however, is key to an understanding of her frustration within the almost literal prison of this bond. The reader knows nothing of where her family lives or what her life was like before her marriage to John, but comes to interpret her youth and freshness by learning what she *looks* like from the Miller, for “fair was this yonge wyf,”^{117 118} girlish enough to sing songs to herself, and childish enough to “skippe and make game,/ as any kyde or calf folwyng his dame.”^{119 120} This infantilized image of Alisoun implies an immaturity indicative of her antics yet to come, for her actions towards the men in the text do not demonstrate a level of self-expression (sexual or otherwise) that is characteristic of an adult. Rather, as we shall see, they are the rebellious reactions of a child to an oppressive relationship. The similes of childishness applied to Alisoun make her stand that much more in contrast to the crusty old carpenter she has just been married off to, who knows she is appealing, and who “heeld hire narwe in a cage,” terrified of being cuckolded.^{121 122}

ii) Sexual Encoding

It is precisely because of the emphasis placed on Lo and Alisoun’s tender youth and sexual inexperience that the consumption of their narratives is both delicious and disgusting to the reader’s palate. The men of both narratives tend to refrain from explicit descriptions of sex, utilizing indirect speech or eliminating quotation altogether, and employing vague metaphors or brief references to convey sexual actions. In neither case are the male narrators privy to the girl’s loss of virginity, at least as far as the reader is led to believe. Lo, we are told, is deflowered at Camp Q, where, the narrative suggests, she is peer-pressured into “try[ing] what it [is] like” with a teenager named Charlie.¹²³ Alisoun’s husband, we must also presume, has enjoyed his beautiful new wife, whom “he lovede moore than his lyf.”^{124 125} Thus while descriptions of the *bodies* of the *fanciulle* are rather carefully, even obsessively, noted *prior* to sexual contact within the narrative, and although we even know, by suggestion, that the girls have had sexual experiences before, the salacious, sexually transgressive experiences of Lo and Alisoun within the narratives are kept coded, deliberately concealed from the reader’s now keenly developed voyeuristic and detective eye.

When, after pages of suspense, Humbert the Handcuffed arrives at the point of describing his long-awaited sexual contact with Lolita, he toys with the reader, writing, “Frigid gentlewomen of the jury! I had thought that months, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to reveal myself to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers.”¹²⁶ The deliberately cruel deletion of that crucial quarter of an hour truly typifies the account of sex given in the rest of the novel. Leading the reader on, Humbert, rewinding a few minutes to the point at which his “dissolution was near,” tricks the reader once again into thinking s/he might get more than an allusion, but abruptly cuts it off again:

However, I shall not bore my learned readers with a detailed account of Lolita’s presumption. Suffice it to say that not a trace of modesty did I perceive...My life was handled by little Lo in an energetic, matter-of-fact manner as if it were an insensate gadget unconnected with me.¹²⁷

¹¹⁷ Chaucer l.3233.

¹¹⁸ “[Alisoun] was beautiful”

¹¹⁹ Chaucer ll.3259-60.

¹²⁰ “skipped and played like any kid or calf would, following its mother”

¹²¹ Chaucer l.3224.

¹²² “Kept her closely locked up”

¹²³ Nabokov 137.

¹²⁴ Chaucer l.3222.

¹²⁵ “he treasured more than life itself”

¹²⁶ Nabokov 132.

¹²⁷ Nabokov 133-4.

This passage comes perhaps the closest of all others like it in the text to describing sex – it is otherwise alluded to as the ‘coming and going’ of Venus, “the operation,” “the other tempest,” and as “sensuous reconciliation.”¹²⁸ So it is no pornographic penning of pedophilia that Humbert the Handcuffed gives his reader. Instead, myriad coded references appear as mere blips on the reader’s radar – a “glans mauve” swimsuit, an Asian allusion to obscenity in Quilty’s “Duk Duk Ranch,” and Lolita’s “lovely young velvety delta.”^{129 130} As Alfred Appel, annotator, summarizes, Humbert offers instead

substrat[a]...quotations from Ronsard and Belleau...anagrammatic obscenities...
foreign disguises...and so forth – erotica under lock and key, buried deep in
dictionaries and the library stacks.¹³¹

Still worse, the reader, his/her sinister desire frustrated by Humbert Humbert’s elusiveness, in working to extract meaning from these references, becomes as participatory as H.H. himself in the trespassing of Lolita’s body.

In Alisoun’s case, too, the eager reader, in bypassing the Narrator’s warning, finds his desire frustrated by the obfuscation of copulation in the text. When, for example, Alisoun and ‘hende’ Nicholas are finally able to execute their trick, the reader hears only that “withouten wordes mo they goon to bedde,”^{132 133} and that shortly thereafter “ther was the revel and the melodye.”^{134 135} Thus, like Humbert’s encryption of Lolita, the Miller lets the reader know who it is that Alisoun sleeps with, as well as when and where it occurs, but the details of sexual contact remain encoded narratologically.

VI) Ribaldry and Rebellion: Breaking the Code of the Narrative

For the male narrator, much of the appeal of the *fanciulla* lies in the perceived fusion of the infantile and the bewitching in her manner. Lo and Alisoun, in the clever accounts given of their looks and actions, are presented as both torturous wielders of power and weak pawns in the men’s game. Humbert notes that it is “that mixture in my Lolita of tender childishness and a kind of eerie vulgarity”¹³⁶ that so appeals to him, and insists that “little Lo was aware of that glow of hers, and I would often catch her *coulant un regard* in the direction of some amiable male, some grease monkey.”¹³⁷ Similarly, Alisoun is imagined both as a little calf or colt, innocent and naïve, and as a temptress, for “sikerly she hadde a likerous ye.”^{138 139} What this combination seems to allow for is both the placement of judgment on the *fanciulla* as seductress and the concurrent maintenance of the ability to obsess over and capitalize on the value of her innocence.

However, while the narrator uses such descriptions in an attempt to place the responsibility for the sexual transgression upon the *fanciulla* (Alisoun, the Miller tells us, “was wyld and yong,”^{140 141} and Humbert reminds of “something very strange: it was she who seduced me”¹⁴²), they are also testaments to why the girls

¹²⁸ Nabokov 169, 207, 227.

¹²⁹ Nabokov 107, 276, 278.

¹³⁰ Appel in Nabokov 374, 440.

¹³¹ Appel in Nabokov 441.

¹³² Chaucer l.3650.

¹³³ “without more words, they went to bed”

¹³⁴ Chaucer l.3652.

¹³⁵ “there was the [sexually figurative] merrymaking and music”

¹³⁶ Nabokov 44.

¹³⁷ Nabokov 159.

¹³⁸ Chaucer l.3244.

¹³⁹ “undoubtedly, she had a flirty eye”

¹⁴⁰ Chaucer l. 3225.

¹⁴¹ “was wild and young”

¹⁴² Nabokov 132.

might come to value themselves in purely physical terms. As young women in the formation of a sense of self, the girls learn, through the attention and intra-male competition their appearance garners, that their bodies are powerful tools of negotiation that may be used for self-assertion and manipulation.

i) The Relation of and Function of the Ribald

While the detailed relation of sexual events might incriminate the male narrator by revealing the true nature of the contact (and is therefore withheld), the relation of the girl-child's ribaldry or snappishness allows that same narrator the opportunity to align the reader's perspective with his own. The crass and flippant treatment of sex and men on the part of the *fanciulle* becomes not only a justification for the men's behavior by highlighting the girls' sexual precociousness, but also a way for them to point to the unmanageability and lack of character in the 'wenches' in order to elicit sympathy for themselves from the reader.

The male narrators thus attempt to use ribaldry to maintain and legitimate the reader's perception of the girls as *objects*. If, in shock and disgust, the men relate the filthy-mouthed, brash, vulgar, or sarcastic bits of Lo and Alisoun, then the *girls* are reprehensible, and the men's culpability decreases because presumably the reader's sympathy for the girls does as well. But the reader, skeptical of the narrators after his/her transition from voyeur into detective, senses the strangeness of Lo and Alisoun as objects, as 'flowers' and 'dolls' who kick, trick, and scheme. Thus the relation of the ribald, rather than causing readerly sympathy for the male narrators, functions instead as a door left ajar in the structure so carefully constructed and sealed by the male narrative gaze, and allows the reader to peer into the true emotions of the *fanciulle*.

Dolly is Humbert's "vulgar darling," and though even Lo's vulgarity is somewhat suppressed in Humbert's storytelling, it is far more explicit than his communication of the sexual.¹⁴³ At first, H.H. is shocked by the flippancy with which Lo talks about sex, and remembers telling her that " '[t]wo people sharing one room, inevitably enter into a kind - how shall I say - a kind - 'The word is incest,' said Lo...with a young golden giggle."¹⁴⁴ Lo's preternatural ability, at twelve, to predict and casually comment on her impending fate might seem to H.H. a good way of legitimating his actions, as it places Lo apart from other girls her age. Lo has lost her virginity of her own accord already, and she here delivers verbal acceptance, albeit sarcastic, of Humbert's advances. The reader, however, in the context of Humbert Humbert's description, may see this startling remark as one that stands outside the otherwise physical account given of Lo in the novel. Made on the very eve of her first sexual encounter with Humbert Humbert, Lo's is the remark of a child who, however lacking in maturity, is clumsily aware and afraid of her body as an object that raises her worth above that of an ordinary child.

Lo's ribaldry is also evident in her negotiations and arguments with Humbert as an attempt to maintain her control over and value to him. Lo's youthful language, though Humbert deems it normatively 'vulgar,' escalates when she expresses frustration or deviancy. Her tantrums and actions bespeak a seriously disturbed adolescent, who, as one of her schoolteachers observes, either "has exceptional emotional control or none at all," but in any case "cannot verbalize her emotions."¹⁴⁵ Instead, she expresses herself with the tool she has best been taught to use: her body. She and Humbert often have very physical fights, for she is unable to communicate her emotions in any sophisticated way, and can only say "she loathe[s]" H.H. and other "unprintable things."¹⁴⁶ She resorts to using her body instead, "ma[king] monstrous faces...turning and twisting...trying to find a weak point so as to wrench herself free, and all the while [staring] at me with those unforgettable eyes where cold anger and hot tears struggled."¹⁴⁷ To fool him into forgetting a nighttime wander she takes to make a telephone call, Lo lets Humbert take her home in the rain, "stretche[s] towards [him] two

¹⁴³ Nabokov 117.

¹⁴⁴ Nabokov 120.

¹⁴⁵ Nabokov 195.

¹⁴⁶ Nabokov 205.

¹⁴⁷ Nabokov 205.

bare arms, raise[s] one knee” and says, “ ‘Carry me upstairs, please. I feel sort of romantic tonight.’”¹⁴⁸ This ‘seduction’ on the part of the pubescent child is a trick that sends H.H. into a haze of delirium, detracting attention from the ruse Lo is executing behind his back, and indeed, it succeeds for a time. This is but one instance of many in the novel in which Lo exerts her ‘control’ by bribing H.H. for money and treats in exchange for sex, but the toll this control takes on her is clear later when she lashes out, cries herself to sleep, or insults her captor. Humbert remembers such exchanges with his ‘frigid princess,’ writing,

Foolishly, I asked her what was the matter.
‘Nothing, you brute,’ she replied.
‘You what?’ I asked. She was silent.¹⁴⁹

Lo variously accuses Hum of being a ‘dope,’ a ‘rapist,’ and a ‘dummy,’ and H.H. remembers, too, her once pushing him away, remarking, “ ‘For Christ’s sake, leave me alone.’ And I would get up from the floor while you looked on, your face deliberately twitching in an imitation of my *tic nerveux*.”¹⁵⁰ Her imitative actions and pitiable expressions of anger demonstrate Lo’s sense of self-worth primarily as a physical object, as well as her inability to articulate her emotions verbally. In *physically* distancing herself from and mocking H.H., and in resorting to slang and screaming in her reactions to Humbert, the reader may see Lo’s use of ribaldry as an act of self-expression.

Eventually, Lolita’s body is also the tool for her escape from Humbert, as she gives herself to Quilty, agreeing to go to his perverted ranch in an effort to escape H.H. Even years later, at the conclusion of the novel, Lo still cannot maturely express herself when the sexual is introduced into the conversation. Though she invites Humbert over in hopes he will give her some money and is able to converse with him at first like an adult, she disintegrates into vulgarity and defensiveness when discussing the past, “pounding a gray cushion with her fist” and remembering that she “said no, I’m not just going to [blow] your beastly boys...Well, he kicked me out.”¹⁵¹ Married, too, her worth remains as physical object – childbearer – a role that costs Lo her life at eighteen.

Alisoun, too, utilizes ribaldry to express anger and enact rebellion. Her verbal spitefulness is as childish as Lo’s; in one instance, she rudely and brashly blows off the singing Absolon, shouting, “ ‘Go fro the window, Jakke fool,’ ”¹⁵² “ ‘lat me slepe, a twenty devel wey!’ ”¹⁵³ and threatening to “caste a ston”¹⁵⁴ at him if he continues to sing to her.¹⁵⁵ Such an outburst is incongruent with the actions of a satisfied, sexually stable adult, for indeed, Absolon has treated Alisoun with more respect and kindness than any other figure in the Tale. Rather, shouting and cursing at Absolon is an outlet for Alisoun’s anger and frustration, and a rebellious form of self-expression. Like Lo’s slangy insults, Alisoun’s words are inarticulate and borrowed, and it is ultimately the vulgar use of her body that allows her to achieve true rebellion.

In a sequence similar to Lo’s ‘seduction’ of Humbert after a fight, Alisoun, after shouting at Absolon, demurely asks him to wait at the window for a kiss.¹⁵⁶ She then makes a trap of her own body, luring Absolon’s lips to the window, then using herself not as an instrument of sexuality, as expected, but of vulgarity. The Miller relates candidly the shocking moment in which “at the window out she putte hir hole”¹⁵⁷ for Absolon, a

¹⁴⁸ Nabokov 207.

¹⁴⁹ Nabokov 140.

¹⁵⁰ Nabokov 193.

¹⁵¹ Nabokov 277.

¹⁵² “Get away from my window, you idiot!”

¹⁵³ “Let me sleep, in the name of twenty demons!”

¹⁵⁴ “throw a stone”

¹⁵⁵ Chaucer ll.3709,3713, 3712.

¹⁵⁶ Chaucer ll.3718-20.

¹⁵⁷ “put her hole out the window”

longing lover, to kiss “hir naked ers.”¹⁵⁸ And, too, there is more detail in this episode than in the Miller’s relation of the sexual, for Absolon kisses Alisoun’s ‘ers’

Ful savourly, er he were war of this.
Abak he stirte, and thoughte it was amys,
For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd.
He felt a thing al rough and long yherd.^{159 160}

The episode of Alisoun’s trick culminates in the telling line, “ ‘Tee-hee!’ quod she, and clapte the wyndow to.”^{161 162} Like Lo’s cruel snorts and giggles, Alisoun’s ‘Tee-hee!’ reminds the reader of her youth and verifies the pleasure she derives from her revenge, now exacted against two men. Just as Lo laughing off ‘incest’ to H.H. seems to the narrator to validate his treatment of her, Alisoun’s casual giggle of triumph to the men is posited as a moment of pure pleasure. The reader, however, sees that though this trick is a momentary triumph for Alisoun, laughing the whole scene off is also a way of distancing herself from the desperation of her own actions and from the fact that reality will soon set in again, and she will likely be ‘heeld narwe’ in her cage once more.

VII) Rereading the Two Texts

For the narrators, such moments of ribaldry are evidence of the girls’ diabolical duality of power and puerility, but to the reader, well-trained by now as a detective, these moments begin to seem increasingly to tear into the fabric of narrative deception, which has otherwise been so neurotically maintained.

Having been frustrated and prepared detectively by the withdrawn promise of sexual detail, the reader is ready to hear the voice of the girls as expressed in terms of tantrums, anger, practical jokes, and self-distancing, sarcastic laughter. S/he realizes that because the use of the ribald by the *fanciulle* is not enciphered, it will, if tugged at, reveal the subverted *quaternary* narrator – the girl-child, who emerges from the text by means of the detective work the reader has done thus far.

i) ‘Seeing’ Lolita and Alisoun

When the male narrative gaze is lifted, and the reader may look more objectively on the girls, it becomes clear that Chaucer and Nabokov have, as authors, given Lo and Alisoun more carefully constructed characters and, too, more credit as individuals than the secondary and tertiary narrators allow. Their subtle refractions of personality, position, and actual potency in relation to the male narrators in the text can, now that the reader ‘sees’ them, be examined.

By the end of both texts, the men are all physically affected by their interactions with the *fanciulle*. In the Miller’s Tale, John falls from the ceiling, Absolon kisses Alisoun’s ‘hole,’ and Nicholas gets a red-hot branding in the behind. In *Lolita*, too, Humbert stands incarcerated, while Quilty dies a brutal death at Humbert’s hands. Intra-male rivalry has had physical consequences for all of the men involved, yet both of the girls appear unaffected.

In fact, many critics posit Alisoun as the victor of a kind of game. As Martin argues, “Alison goes unscathed, as if she cannot be blamed for wanting ways out of her cage,”¹⁶³ and Bishop exclaims that “Alisoun

¹⁵⁸ Chaucer ll.3731, 3734.

¹⁵⁹ Chaucer ll.3735-8.

¹⁶⁰ “with passion, before he was aware [of what it was]. He started back, realizing that something was off, for he knew well a woman has no beard. [But] he had felt something rough and long-haired.”

¹⁶¹ Chaucer l.3740.

¹⁶² “ ‘Tee-hee!’ she said, shutting the window”

¹⁶³ Martin 75.

gets off scot free!”¹⁶⁴ The reader, however, cannot simply believe Alisoun is left unscathed. Indeed, Alisoun cannot be blamed for wanting to escape her prison, and her ‘Tee-hee!’ hardly leaves her scot-free. Although, in her own way, Alisoun has asserted her power (Laskaya notes Laura Kendrick’s point that “a kiss bestowed on the lower orifice, instead of on the mouth, puts woman ‘on top’ in a grotesque parody of the ceremony of vassalage”), she still faces a lifetime of captivity, and her physical worth will, the reader knows, only decrease.¹⁶⁵

In contrast, despite her escape, it is unlikely that anyone would venture to call Lo a winner at her game. This is because Humbert, upon seeing her at the end of the novel, is finally able to de-solipsize Lolita, admitting that

it struck me...that I simply did not know a thing about my darling’s mind and that quite possibly, behind the juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate – dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me...¹⁶⁶

At this moment, Humbert finally sees Lolita for who she is, an independent entity, and one whose life has been tragically altered by his actions. Yet his vision is simply ‘too little, too late,’ for Lo already values herself solely as an object, and will die attempting to fulfill her physical worth as a mother for her new husband.

Interestingly, both Lo and Alisoun say they are in love with the male figure who offers them the opportunity of transgressing the sexual boundaries set for them by their captors. Lo says she wants only Q (“‘I want only you’”), and in fact, her refusal to perform sexually for Cue’s camera is perhaps her way of expressing her feelings of love to him.¹⁶⁷ Alisoun, too, professes to the singing Absolon that she “love[s] another” – Nicholas.¹⁶⁸ Though neither Quilty nor Nicholas offers the *fanciulle* any more respect or love than Humbert and John, they have no trouble attracting their prey because they offer the escape routes for which Lo and Alisoun so avidly yearn. Quilty and Nicholas, then, are avenues for the use of ribaldry that momentarily frees and empowers Lo and Alisoun. The great paradox of the *fanciulla*, then, is not simply the combination of sexual power and innocence described to us by the men. Instead, it is the marriage in her between a disturbing awareness of her own worth as sexual currency and her pathetic naïveté about the real potential of human sexual relationships. The profession of love on the part of the *fanciulla* is a way of grasping at freedom and expressing independence from her captor, but likely not a development of a material, mature relationship.

Importantly, though, however hurt or disillusioned the girls may be, they do momentarily or sporadically succeed in becoming tricksters as powerful in their deception as the males who describe them. They have attempted to ward off the reality of their lives in order to keep their spirits intact, and, as Bishop notes, in worlds of such treachery, tricksters thrive because “[t]he cardinal sin is not one of the Deadly Seven, but folly and gullibility.”¹⁶⁹

ii) The Implication of Ribaldry for the Male Narrators

Yet the reward for the reader’s detective work is not only the revelation of Lo and Alisoun’s agency, but the elucidation of the male narrators as well. In encoding the *fanciulle*, the authors ensure, too, that the male narrators experience some moments of narrative breakdown. This is especially true in *Lolita*, when Humbert the Handcuffed loses control of language, and the reality of his horrible ‘former’ self shines through. At such times, the reader experiences a sense of horror and guilt at feeling anything for him at all. When Humbert explains to Lolita that “[a] minor female, who allows a person over twenty-one to know her carnally, involves her victim into statutory rape, or second-degree sodomy, depending on the technique, and the

¹⁶⁴ Bishop 61.

¹⁶⁵ Kendrick qtd. in Laskaya 87.

¹⁶⁶ Nabokov 284.

¹⁶⁷ Nabokov 277.

¹⁶⁸ Chaucer l.3710.

¹⁶⁹ Bishop 59.

maximum penalty is ten years,” the reader realizes the absurd extent to which Humbert has fooled Lo (and the reader) into participating in his fantasy of legitimation.¹⁷⁰

The Miller, too, allows us to see through his ‘game’ when he describes Alisoun as ‘a newe pere-jonette tree.’ Interestingly, the simile of the pear tree suggests the ripening of an object that will quickly rot – thus Alisoun is not only an object, organic or metallic, she is one of transient worth, the veritable *fruit vert* that Humbert Humbert so desires in the pages of *Lolita*.¹⁷¹ Hence, both authors carefully toy with the reader’s longing to form a clear opinion about their characters – at times we fall in with the male gaze; at times we are ashamed to realize that we have been seduced by it.

The male narrators, though, are ultimately tragic figures in the texts, incapable of understanding the girls they gaze upon. Even though H.H. eventually realizes Lo’s humanity, he never understands her or truly knows her. As when the Miller passes Alisoun off as merely being ‘wylde and yong,’ Humbert shows his ignorance of Lo in listing off the many things he purchased for her to try to make her happy – “four books of comics...two cokes, a manicure set, a travel clock with luminous dial, a ring with a real topaz.”¹⁷² Though the list alone is a heartbreaking testament to his lack of understanding, Humbert adds that “at the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go.”¹⁷³ As Nabokov himself said of H.H., “Humbert Humbert is a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear ‘touching.’”¹⁷⁴ Indeed, once the reader has decoded the ribaldry of the girls and their rebellion against the men, this is almost all the men can manage in the reader’s eyes, for the potency of their poetry is lost.

VIII) Conclusions

It is ultimately the reader who must take responsibility for the comprehension of Lo and Alisoun. It is s/he who, like the narrators, proves sadistic enough to become a voyeur and a detective, despite having been fairly warned, but, unlike the narrators, is able to see Lo and Alisoun’s ribaldry as rebellion.

While the reader may experience delight-disgust as s/he anticipates the sexually explicit narrative, s/he soon discovers that s/he must settle instead for vagueness and allusion. As Appel notes, “Nabokov has had the last laugh, in more ways than one,” for his is “a withdrawn promise of pornography.”¹⁷⁵ In fact, both Chaucer and Nabokov have the ‘last laugh’ in that they refuse to give the reader the pornographic sexual descriptions s/he awaits, thus forcing him/her to work detectively, and eventually preparing him/her to disassemble the male narration and to truly see the female character, rather than to merely experience her body.

Perhaps this is why *Lolita* and the Miller’s Tale continue to challenge us as texts today – they require much of us as readers, playing mercilessly with our latent desires and fears and cleverly muffling the *fanciulla*’s voice. Yet thanks to their construction, we are, by virtue of our illicit desire, forced to become detective readers. In the end it is this ‘training’ in detection that allows us to unravel the layers of male narration that at first so powerfully entrance us, and to see the girls for who they truly are – to hear them through their rebellious ribaldry. If we read carefully and detectively, we discover that there may be something profound about such ‘detective’ narratives, in that they force us to recognize the importance of confronting our own buried selves in order to discover the subverted voice within the text. What we discover in this process is that “the object of passion is unimportant, but...the nature of passion is constant.”¹⁷⁶ *Lolita* and the Miller’s Tale dare us, as readers, to engage in a hazardous game, one that almost immediately implicates us in the guilt of voyeurism. However, by frustrating our perilous desire and by pushing us onward to the level of detection, the texts

¹⁷⁰ Nabokov 151.

¹⁷¹ Benson in Chaucer 844.

¹⁷² Nabokov 142.

¹⁷³ Nabokov 142.

¹⁷⁴ Nabokov qtd. in Herbert 4.

¹⁷⁵ Appel in Nabokov 441.

¹⁷⁶ Butler qtd. in Bader 62.

eventually proffer the vibrant voices of two suppressed figures, whose vitality, once visible, invigorates the work and changes the way the reader consumes it.

In performing such work as readers, something of ourselves is revealed as well, for, as Ciancio writes, “[s]hould we care to play it, the object of the game is the discovery of the art in each of our individual lives within the realm of infinite uncertainties, and in this rests our faint and only hope against the grotesque.”¹⁷⁷ If this is true, the importance of our readership lies not only in our power as readers and critics of literature, but in our potential as human beings to use our readerly experience to effect change in those relationships that stand within the realm of reality as well.

¹⁷⁷ Ciancio 533.

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Cover Illustrations:

- Left: "The Kiss," Charles Mozley (1914-1991). Folio II of Picadilly Rare Books' illustrated *Canterbury Tales*. 23.5"x16.5"
- Right: Still from 1997 film version of *Lolita*. Adrian Lynn, dir. Pictured: Dominique Swain.

