

Post-modern courtly love

Even if we have come a long way from the Renaissance, certain aspects of human psychology have not really changed much since then. Many of the great Renaissance sonneteers were in their teens or early twenties when they wrote their best work, and though the actual concept of teenage alienation didn't exist in those days, we can see some *parallels* between their work and the dark love songs of certain contemporary rock and pop singers: the adoration of an unattainable girl and the pain and self-pity this causes, which is at the same time experienced as a kind of masochistic pleasure.

No doubt many people would say that *pop songs* contain none of the refinement of expression of the sonnets, but they compensate for this in other ways. Although they may seem crude and inarticulate in comparison to their Renaissance ancestors, they translate what can no longer be expressed in words into pop's beautiful noise, which at its best conveys a kind of emotional truth that no other language, or form of communication, can.

Here is 'Creep', a song by the English rock group *Radiohead*, from the album *Pablo Honey* (1993). In this song the singer perceives the object of his desire as an 'angel', belonging to a beautiful world that he is excluded from. This perfect world evokes media images of ideal beauty compared to which the singer feels totally inadequate. Just like Wyatt and Petrarch, he hates himself but he also considers himself as a monster or the 'creep' of the title. But by the end of the song this becomes a positive affirmation of an alternative idea of identity. This alternative world becomes clear when you hear the song, which alternates between quiet and noisy passages.

Creep

When you were here before, couldn't look you in the eye
 You're just like an angel. Your skin makes me cry
 You float like a feather, in a beautiful world
 And I wish I was special. You're so very special
 But I'm a creep,¹ I'm a weirdo.²
 What the hell am I doing here?
 I don't belong here.
 I don't care if it hurts, I want to have control
 I want a perfect body, I want a perfect soul
 I want you to notice, when I'm not around
 You're so very special, I wish I was special
 But I'm a creep, I'm a weirdo.

What the hell am I doing here?
 I don't belong here.
 She's running out again,
 She's running out
 She's run run run running out...
 Whatever makes you happy, whatever you want
 You're so very special. I wish I was special...
 But I'm a creep, I'm a weirdo,
 What the hell am I doing here?
 I don't belong here.
 I don't belong here.

1 **creep**: (modern colloquial) detestable person.

2 **weirdo**: (modern colloquial) someone who acts strangely.

TUNE IN

- 1 Look for a recording of the song and listen to it. How would you describe the atmosphere? In what way does the quality of the voice emphasise the theme?
- 2 Can you think of any other songs which convey some of the spirit of courtly love?