

Stalkers as Rebels in Renaissance Love Poetry

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In its broadest senses, the noun *rebel* can be defined in various ways. Often a rebel is thought of as “a person who resists any authority, control, or tradition” (dictionary.com). Sometimes a rebel refuses “to obey rules or accept normal standards of behavior” (merriam-webster.com). A rebel “thinks or behaves differently” from the norm (dictionary.cambridge.org) or chooses “to dissent from an accepted moral code” (*Collins English Dictionary*). These, of course, are mainly nonpolitical definitions, but they are the kinds of meanings appropriate to the kinds of persons I intend to discuss in this chapter. Those persons—those “rebels”—are the kind of men who often appear as obsessive, infatuated, indefatigable wooers in Renaissance love poetry. Often these men refuse to take No for an answer. If they pursue women and those women reject them, they assume that the women are either cruel, hard-hearted, deceitful, or simply mistaken. Instead of redirecting their attention to other possible lovers, these men remain fixated on the objects of their fantasies. They refuse to give up. They have managed to convince themselves that the women they desire *should* desire them in return, and they eventually often become angry and vindictive when their courtships are refused.

In short, these men often behave like stalkers centuries before that term in the modern sense was ever invented. A *stalker* in the sixteenth century would have been understood as one “who stalks game” (*Oxford English Dictionary*)—an interesting fact given that many of the wooers in Renaissance love poetry *do* think of women as prey to be pursued. But the *OED* dates the earliest usage of *stalker* in our contemporary sense (“one who follows or harasses someone . . . with whom he or she has become obsessed”) only to 1947. Did stalkers in this sense suddenly appear only in the mid-twentieth century? Or has stalking in this sense always existed, or at least existed long before this word was chosen to define it? I

would argue that some of the earliest and most obvious stalkers in modern Western history are the besotted, infatuated male “lovers” who appear in Renaissance “love” poetry. Yet to call them *lovers* is a bit of a misnomer, because usually they are less in genuine love with the women they stalk than they are in love with themselves. And usually they have in mind not real love but mere sexual gratification. It seems odd, too, to call them lovers because usually they are roundly refused by the women they pursue. Instead of taking the hint, however, these obsessed, relentless men redouble their efforts. In other words, they behave like the classic stalkers we know so well from contemporary headlines and news reports.

Traits of Stalkers

Stalking, as a subject for professional research by psychologists and social scientists, has only recently begun to be seriously studied. One important book dates from 1998, another from 2007. The first volume—edited by J. Reid Meloy—bills itself as “the first scholarly book on stalking ever published” (back cover). Meloy’s introductory chapter (“The Psychology of Stalking”) is especially helpful. Much of what he says there seems obviously relevant to anyone seeking to understand the thoughts, feelings, and behavior of many smitten “lovers” in Renaissance “love” poetry. In a long list of “Current Findings,” Meloy cites a number of points that seem especially pertinent to the stalkers found in Renaissance amorous verse:

- Stalking is an old behavior, but a new crime. . . .
- *The majority of stalkers are males, and the majority of victims are females.* [my italics]
- Most individuals who stalk are not psychotic at the time of their stalking. . . .
- There is suggestive research that stalkers are more intelligent than other criminals, perhaps accounting for their manipulative skills.
. . .
- *There is some evidence to consider stalking, at least for some individuals, a courtship disorder There is usually a history of failed relationships, and usually the stalker is not in a sexual*

pair bond at the time of the criminal behavior. Stalking for some individuals is a maladaptive response to social incompetence, social isolation, and loneliness. . . . [my italics]

- *The most useful perpetrator typology . . . identified three groups—simple obsessionals, love obsessions, and erotomaniacs. . . . [my italics]*
- *The length of pursuit by stalkers is measured in months or years; this is not a brief encounter. . . . [my italics]*
- Stalking marks the far end of a continuum that begins with “obsessive relational intrusions”
- Pursuit patterns by stalkers are multiple and varied and most commonly include physical approach behavior
- . . . the most commonly *perceived* motivation by victims of stalking is control
- *Typical psychological defenses exhibited by stalkers include denial, minimization, and projection of blame onto the victim. [my italics]*
- *One psychodynamic theory put forth to explain stalking postulates that such individuals form a narcissistic linking fantasy with their victims, which is then met with rejection when acted upon. The rejection stimulates shame, which is defended against with rage, and thus fuels the pursuit of the victim. . . . [my italics] (4-7)*

Meloy lists many other points that seem relevant to my argument, but the ones cited above are certainly the most pertinent and are enough on which to build my present case. My central argument is this:

many “lovers” in Renaissance amorous verse can be viewed as proto-stalkers whom the authors of the poems distinguish from themselves and whom the authors implicitly satirize. The authors, far from sympathizing with their “stalkers,” find these men ridiculous and laughable (if also somewhat vengeful) and invite readers to do the same. The “stalkers” in Renaissance love poetry are “rebels” in the senses that (1) they defy social norms, (2) they defy moral norms, (3) and they defy what is widely perceived as “common sense.”

Another important point is this: it is difficult to imagine any sensible *modern* woman who would want to be pursued in the ways that some Renaissance stalkers pursue the ladies of their fantasies.