2.   Abduction's Who, How, and Why

Abstract

Historiography traditionally depicts abduction as either a violent strategy used to force wealthy heiresses into marriage or a romantic elopement used by two people to marry against the wishes of parents and relatives. Chapter 2 explores this dichotomy by looking at 'the abductor' as a collective noun for those who instigated the abduction or were considered to bear some degree of responsibility. By examining the abductors' social and professional background, the motivations attributed to them in the records, the position of the persons they abducted, and the relations between all people involved, this chapter aims for a better understanding of the phenomenon's who, how and why.

Keywords: perpetrators, politicised feuds, intergenerational conflicts, intrafamilial conflicts, impossible marriage

Heylwige Comans appeared in the episcopal court of Liège in 1434. She came there to defend herself against the claim made by Goeswijn sWevers, her alleged husband. Goeswijn stated that he had seduced Heylwige after which they had gotten married. Heylwige's defence gives an interesting account of what had happened, completely contradicting Goeswijn's claim. According to the defence, Heylwige had been abducted violently and some of her relatives had played a very dubious role in what had happened. The record explains that Heylwige lived together with Goeswijn's sister in a house in Kaulille (village in the County of Loon) where she was approached by Goeswijn, Goeswijn's brother, and a third man, who was married to Heylwige's aunt. The men convinced Heylwige to go with them under false pretences and dropped her off at the house of another man, described as 'a blood relative' of Heylwige. The next day, Goeswijn's father visited Heylwige and explained to her that her grandfather urged her to go back to Kaulille if she did not want to suffer 'significant losses', probably a reference to a

threat of disinheritance.[1] Together with Goeswijn, his father, and his brother, Heylwige returned to Kaulille. There, the group met with, among others, Heylwige's aunt who was married to one of the abductors. The next day, Goeswijn and Heylwige exchanged words of future consent and thus got betrothed. Heylwige had, however, expressed her consent against her will and had only done this because she had been misled by her aunt and some other relatives—at least this is the defence's deposition claim. Goeswijn, on the contrary, describes his relationship with Heylwige as a love affair. His plea states that he had expressed his love to Heylwige and she had allegedly replied 'that she would rather have the aforementioned plaintiff as her husband than someone who would be fifty florens richer'.[2] He added that Heylwige no longer wanted to acknowledge her marriage to him because her relatives who did not agree with the marriage had pressured her to distance herself from him.

While Goeswijn's plea describes the abduction as a consequence of the socioeconomic imbalance between him and Heylwige and the resistance of her relatives, Heylwige's defence paints a much more complex image that challenges the abductor versus abductee narrative through the confusing involvement of some of her relatives in arranging the abduction and facilitating the marriage. Over the last few decades, anthropologists and historians have criticized studies that start from a collective understanding of 'the family' as an organic and concordant entity composed of people all pulling in the same direction to increase and secure the family position and patrimony.[3] Therefore, rather than interpreting intrafamilial conflicts as tension between 'the family' and one rebellious individual who was jeopardizing the family's patrimonial aspirations, historians increasingly attend to the everchanging relations and power dynamics within families. However, research on marriage continues to juxtapose the individual's wish to choose their own partner against the family's interest in a strategic alliance, thus interpreting marriage-making conflicts as tension between 'the family' and one rebellious individual who was threatening the family's patrimonial aspirations.[4] This chapter argues that those abductions that were conflicts about marriage and partner choice were not merely clashes

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1   SAL, AD, no. 1, fol. 83r.

2   Ibid.

3   Viazzo and Lynch, 'Anthropology, Family History, and the Concept of Strategy', 427; Aurell, *La parenté déchirée*.

4   In making this division, historians often put the father as head of the household and rational defender of the lineage strategy against the daughter as a sentimental individual pursuing individual interests, see Prevenier, 'Courtship'; Dean, 'Fathers and Daughters'; Titone, 'The Right

between the abductor and abductee, or the abductee and her parents. Instead, many abductions, even ones in which women supposedly consented to go with their abductors, were not generational conflicts. They were struggles between families, or sometimes between different kin groups within the abductee's family, that should be interpreted in the context of the politicized family feuds that were ubiquitous in the late medieval urban Low Countries.

Focussing on 'the abductor', a collective noun for those who instigated the abduction or bore some degree of responsibility for it, will elucidate what motivated people to resort to abduction to contract marriage. The first section will analyze the popular medieval theme of the impossible marriage and its deployment in legal records to explain the abductor's motivation (as it was incorporated into Goeswijn's plea). Linking this theme to the social background of the abductors and abductees in this study shows that abduction did not only touch the lives of aristocratic elites, as some have argued.[5] These sections are followed by an inquiry into the relationships among the group of abductors and between the abductors and the abductee. In short, this chapter will demonstrate that abduction was rarely a pageant featuring one man and one woman sidelining their parents but instead featured conflicting interests and tactics from many different parties in complex social constellations.

The impossible marriage

The records seldom reveal the motives behind an abduction explicitly. If any information is included, it usually refers to love, wealth, or both. This type of information generally appears in pleas, defences, and pardon letters, all of which were records that deployed personal or emotional statements for strategic reasons. Moreover, these inclusions in legal records resemble narratives about love and impossible marriage in late medieval literature.

The idea of a social imbalance between lovers was a popular cultural theme as the numerous works of contemporary literature that deal with

to Consent'; Wieben shows that this clash of interest could also occur between parents and sons in Wieben, 'Unwilling Grooms'.

5   Jeremy Goldberg has argued that abduction marriages were an aristocratic rather than a bourgeois phenomenon, in Goldberg, *Communal Discord*, 175. His remark was echoed by Gwen Seabourne who suggested that English abduction legislation was probably meant to deal with disputes in the higher levels of society. Seabourne, *Imprisoning Medieval Women*, 92.