marriages only happened at the highest social level.[73] Nevertheless, there are indications in this section of the importance of socioeconomic motives to those who instigated abductions. This does not mean that other motives could not have played a role, as emotional and personal incentives are more difficult to detect in legal records than financial ones. Since often socioeconomic factors and feelings were undoubtedly intertwined, distinguishing between them is impossible and undesirable.

A gendered offense?

The depiction of abduction as a highly gendered offence, in which a rich woman is kidnapped for her fortune by a man of lower descent or in which a wealthy woman runs off with her poorer boyfriend willingly, dominates the historiography.[74] This section analyzes the two protagonists, the abductor and the abductee, and the gendered binary perception of abduction as an offence committed by an active man on a passive woman. I argue that the records reveal more diversity in gender as well as in the actual people involved in abductions.

   Although most abductees were women, on several occasions, men and/or women abducted boys to marry them off against their parents' wishes. On 23 June 1473, for example, the Ghent aldermen punished the abovementioned Jan Springoen for abducting a young boy and marrying him off against the will of his relatives.[75] The bailiff's accounts and sentence books from the three cities include records of 31 female abductors out of the total of 625 and at least 7 male abductees from the total of 308. The sex of 4 abductees is not specified. It is important to note that not all the 31 women were trying to conclude marriages for themselves, nor were all male abductees taken by women. Most of the women accompanied male offenders or encouraged women to cooperate in their abductions. For example, the aldermen of Antwerp punished a woman called Kateline, whose last name is not mentioned, on 1 March 1435. She had to make a pilgrimage to Cologne and stay there for three years because she had talked the daughter of Jan Vander Rijt into agreeing to leave with an abductor ('she advised for abduction').[76] In another case from Vier Ambachten, Grielken Kuenync paid a composition

73   De Moor and Van Zanden, 'Girl Power', 4–7.
74   See, for example, Youngs, '"She Hym Fresshely Followed and Pursued"', 77–78.
75   CAG, S 212, no. 1, fol. 3r (23 June 1473).
76   CAA, V, no. 234, fol. 57v (1 March 1435).

to the bailiff for encouraging a girl to go away with Cornelis Hout to marry him.[77]

It is extremely rare but the records do sometimes record an abduction with a woman as the main perpetrator and a man as the 'victim'. There are only two cases, both in the Antwerp bailiff's accounts, of women abducting men for marriage. Around 1419, Johanna Van Lymborgh abducted Joes Vanden Scriecke. Together with some accomplices, she pulled Joes onto her wagon one evening and carried him off to the house of someone called Geert van Tichelt. Before the bailiff could figure out exactly what had happened, the account states, Joes and Johanna were already married. He had not screamed, nor did he want to file a complaint, so the case was not taken to court.[78] Around 1420, also in Antwerp, Liesbeth Recmast abducted Jan Peters in the case briefly discussed above. The two met for the first time at the fair and 'started to love each other and secretly got engaged', according to the account. Liesbeth's friends and relatives went to discuss the marriage with Jan's father, who was very surprised by this visit since he had not been informed about his son's upcoming marriage. He refused to allow the marriage since 'he was richer than' Liesbeth.[79] Faced with this refusal, Liesbeth decided to take control. The record states that one evening she took her wagon, lined up the support of some anonymous men, and abducted Jan. Jan's father complained, but because the couple had already married and Jan was of age and had consented, the case was settled with a composition.[80]

These cases are remarkable because they completely contradict the way that clerks usually described abductions and, by extension, medieval gendered perceptions of courtship, marriage, and sexuality. It is no coincidence that both cases were recorded in two successive accounts from the Antwerp bailiff; the stories are remarkably similar. Both women abducted a man at night using a wagon with the help of accomplices. The striking similarity suggests that the clerk wrote a stereotypical description that connected the abduction to the well-known topos of young love hindered by parental resistance. In Liesbeth's case, the clerk defined the woman as the actor because Jan's father had initiated the legal action that presented his son and himself as the damaged parties and Liesbeth as the party responsible for the damage. Perhaps Liesbeth and Johanna formed premarital relationships with Jan and Joes that were ended by the men's forthcoming marriages to

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77   SAB, CC, no. 14112, May–September 1423, fol. 10v.
78   SAB, CC, no. 12902, November 1419–June 1420, fol. 263v–264r.
79   SAB, CC, no. 12902, June 1430–May 1421, fol. 282rv.
80   Ibid.

suitable spouses.[81] Women did not always accept their roles as temporary girlfriends, as a Bologna case shows. A woman accused her lover of rape and neglecting his promise to marry her. He answered that he had only promised to take her as his girlfriend, not his wife.[82] It is possible that Johanna and Liesbeth found themselves in similar situations and, faced with the prospect of their partners' marriage to other women, decided to take control and defeat their boyfriends' families. Low Countries consistory court records contain lots of examples of women bringing breach of promise cases to court, claiming that men had promised marriage and then backed out. These cases were rarely ever successful, although these alleged husbands often had to give these women money to compensate them for their loss of virginity.[83] In any case, reverse abductions were extremely rare. The vast majority of the cases involved a male abductor and a female abductee, at least according to the records.

Abduction language nearly always identifies the abductor as the active party and the abductee as the passive one, an indication that this terminology is highly gendered. This gendered language matched descriptions of sexuality that were deeply engrained in late medieval culture. Ruth Mazo Karras argued that medieval people saw acts of sexuality as being perpetrated by an active and a passive partner, namely as something a man did to a woman. In the process of courtship, too, it was a man's role to take the initiative and court a woman. Gwen Seabourne has identified this pattern in English abduction cases as well. To support her contention that abductions were elopements in disguise, she pointed out the passive language used to describe the women's involvement. Although clerks describe some abductions as consensual, they rarely suggested that the abduction was a joint endeavour; he abducts her 'by her will and consent'. Because it is still the abductor who is described as perpetrating the act and thus the one who abducted the abductee, there is an unequal balance of power. Even in cases that use the language of seduction and consent, it is the man who seduces and the woman who 'accepts' the seduction.

While gendered formulations dominate, some records do describe the woman as an active subject of the abduction verb. Some records literally state that the woman 'went away with' her abductor, thus that she went to him by herself. In Vier Ambachten, Anthone le Wint paid a fine for abducting Callekin Crels. However, the record states that it was Calleken herself who went away

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81 Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 127–28; Fernández Pérez, 'Ni buenas, ni malas', 371–74.

82 Lansing, 'Concubines, Lovers, Prostitutes', 93–95.

83 Vleeschouwers-Van Melkebeek, 'Self-Divorce', 96–97.

with Anthone to mary him.[84] The Leuven aldermen's registers contain many brief statements by women officially declaring that they had chosen to follow the abductors that also use 'to go away with'. The clerks reported that these women stated that they 'went away' with their abductors. The church court records of the Low Countries also tended to portray the woman as an active partner. In these records, the clerks often added that a woman 'went away with' (*abivit cum*) a man.[85] Moreover, these registers featured significant formulations that completely reversed other linguistic constructions that were usually gendered. The records of the Brussels church court often state that the abductee 'allowed herself to be abducted' (*se abduci permittendo*) and, even more striking, that the man and woman 'abducted each other mutually' (*mutuo abduxerunt*).[86] This terminology deviates from the common medieval way of describing sexual acts between a man and a woman as involving an active male and a passive female. By framing these cases as mutual abductions, these records situated men and women on the same level of activity or passivity and attributed to them an equal degree of initiative and responsibility. Such inclusions suggest that medieval views on consent were not uniform, and several visions coexisted at the same time. Therefore, seduction and/or elopement, the category that historians have applied to these 'consensual' cases, encompasses multiple descriptions of different shades of consent, some active and enthusiastic and others passive and submissive. The language of consent in these records reflected medieval ideas about sex, chief among them the portrayal of men as active partners and women as passive ones. Besides this dominant perception, however, some records do attribute a more active role to abductees, thus challenging stereotypical abduction narratives.

Moreover, several of the above examples feature abductions carried out by a group of people rather than a single abductor. The bailiff's accounts and sentence books document 308 clear cases of abduction perpetrated by at least 625 abductors (Figure 2). There were more than 625 people involved since some records state that there were accomplices without specifying how many there were. For example, the abovementioned Jan van Ranssem, who abducted the daughter of the Leuven mayor, had to pay an additional composition to the bailiff for an unquantified group of people who had helped him.[87] When Margriet vanden Bossche declared her consent to the

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84   SAB, CC, no. 14113, January–May 1428, fol. 7v.

85   See for example: SAL, AD, no. 1, fol. 124r; Vleeschouwers-Van Melkebeek, *Liber sentenciarum*, no. 790, 884.

86   See for example: Vleeschouwers-Van Melkebeek, *Liber sentenciarum*, no. 509, 515, 520.

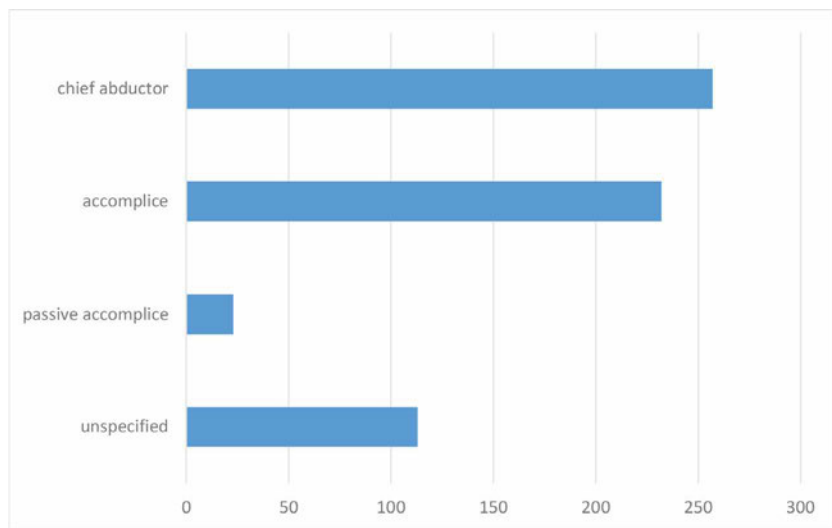87   SAB, CC, no. 12656, June–December 1453, fol. 263rv.

Figure 2: The role of 625 perpetrators involved in 308 abduction cases included in the sentence books and bailiff's accounts of Antwerp, Leuven and Ghent (city and districts).

aldermen of Leuven on 28 September 1437, she said that she had gone with Henricke de Welde freely and that 'what the aforementioned Henricke and his accomplices had done to her, had happened with her consent'.[88] The declaration does not give any further information about these accomplices, such as their names or their number. Most records merely distinguish between the abductor and his helpers, referring to the former as the *principael* (chief offender) and the latter as the *medeplegers* or *hulperen* (accomplices or helpers).[89]

The *principael* was generally the one who intended to marry the abductee, although in a few cases, a girl was abducted by a group of people who wanted to marry her off to someone else who was not involved in her actual removal. Some records do not specify the different abductors' roles (see 'unspecified' in Figure 2). Of the 308 abduction cases in the bailiff's accounts and sentence books, a group of people definitely perpetrated 151 abductions. The actual percentage of group abductions was higher because the records indicate that some of the people involved might have been punished at a different time or in a different court. Other records simply did not mention all of the

88   CAL, OA, no. 7332, fol. 101v (28 September 1437).
89   Of the eighty-six deeds with declarations of consent found in the Leuven aldermen registers between 1389 and 1461, sixteen mention that the reported consensual abduction was executed by multiple perpetrators. These records are discussed in Chapter 3.

people involved. For example, the Leuven bailiff's accounts contain an act about the punishment of an accomplice to an abduction perpetrated in the County of Loon. Since he was a citizen of Leuven, he was sentenced there instead of in Loon.[90] This report suggests that some abductions thought to be the work of one individual based on the existing records might have involved multiple perpetrators. Pardon letters, consistory court records, and aldermen's registers (not included in Figure 2) similarly reveal that many abductors were supported by helpers. There could be between one and five people assisting the main perpetrator in an abduction. In some extreme cases, there were over ten men abducting one woman.[91]

These abduction adventures were collective for two reasons. The first and most obvious was a practical consideration: kidnapping a woman could be a difficult and risky operation that required planning and collaboration. If an abduction happened, it was in the best interest of the abductee's relatives to act promptly, pursue the abductor and abductee, and retrieve the abductee before any damage had been done, that is, a marriage had been contracted and word of the abduction had spread throughout the community. Several 'abductors' were punished after unsuccessful attempts to abduct women. For example, Willem De Smet had tried to abduct Lijsbet Winters, daughter of Jan, with the help of four accomplices in Kortrijk-Dutsel east of Leuven. However, Lijsbet was accompanied by a woman named Lijsbet vanden Meysene, 'who was with her and helped her'. When the women resisted, the abductors had to let Lijsbet Winters go.[92] In other cases, the abductee's family immediately pursued the abductor and managed to bring the abductee back home. The Leuven bailiff punished Symoen Sraets for trying to abduct Lijsbeth Goerts in 1472. Carrying a basket on her head, Lijsbeth was on her way to her father. The abductor took her basket and tried to take away Lijsbeth as she strenuously resisted. Lijsbeth's father intervened and fought the abductor. Although he was hurt, he reportedly managed to liberate his daughter.[93] These cases were all attempts rather than actual cases of abduction. The damage these attempts caused to the abductees' honour was probably negligible since these women had not spent any time alone with the abductor and thus clearly had avoided intercourse and/or the exchange of vows.[94]

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90 SAB, CC, no. 12654, December 1418–June 1419, fol. 190v.
91 See for example ADN, B1688, fol. 29v–30r (December 1458).
92 SAB, CC, no. 12653, July–December 1405, fol. 68v.
93 SAB, CC, no. 12658, July 1472–December 1473, fol. 50v.
94 About young women and notions of privacy and honour, see Chapter 3, page 133.

In anticipating protective reactions by the woman's relatives, abductors often went out heavily armed. For example, Adriaen de Metser and Aert van Rosendale abducted a woman at night. Armed with steel crossbows, they took her to an inn outside of the 'red gate' in Antwerp.[95] By stressing the fact that these perpetrators were armed, the clerks were discrediting them further since carrying weapons was strictly forbidden in late medieval cities.[96] When the abductor targeted a young woman from a high social group, her relatives would be keeping an especially close eye on her to protect her from aggressive suitors. This was the case for Jozijnken Gheldofs. Together with her father, Jan Gheldofs, she attended a wedding in *Heilige Kerst*, a parish in Ghent. As they were returning home, Mathijs Vandermeere abducted the girl while his accomplices restrained her father to prevent him from going after his daughter.[97] The Brussels consistory court records include the abduction of Katherina Vander Linden by Jan Vander Berct and an unspecified number of armed accomplices.[98] Abductions usually entailed a violent clash between two groups: those who broke into a family's domestic sphere to take the woman away and those belonging to that domestic sphere, who were trying to prevent this rupture of the household. Weapons and accomplices stacked the odds in the abductor's favour.

Sylvie Joye points out a second reason for the presence of accomplices in abductions during the Central Middle Ages in Western Europe: the presence of accomplices was a prestigious sign of the abductor's power.[99] Joye connected having accomplices to the customs of noble marriage in the early and central medieval periods. A nobleman took his squires with him when he made a *demande de marriage,* to impress the woman and her relatives and appear powerful. Refusing his request entailed an assault on his reputation as a noble. He could then react with violence and perhaps abduct the woman.[100] Laura Gowing states that in early modern England, too, it was custom for men to be accompanied by their friends when initiating courtship and conducting 'talks of marriage' with their possible future in-laws. This collective endeavour culminated, she argues, in abduction cases.[101] In her study of the use of obscenity in

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95 CAA, V, no. 234, fol. 182v (2 March 1510).

96 Glaudemans, *Om die wrake wille*, 112–14; Crombie, *Archery and Crossbow Guilds*, 146; Vrancken, *De Blijde Inkomsten*, 137–38.

97 SAB, CC, no. 14118, May–September 1483, fol. 16rv.

98 Vleeschouwers and Van Melkebeek, *Liber sentenciarum*, no. 1335, 835 (7 July 1458).

99 Joye, *La femme ravie*, 114–20.

100 Ibid., 114–15.

101 Gowing, *Domestic Dangers*, 151.

late medieval English texts, Carissa Harris highlights the importance of having a male audience (imagined or real) for men when interacting with women sexually as it reinforced homosocial relations and helped them in acquiring masculine status.[102] In current historiography, there is little discussion of the methods of initiating marriages, making proposals, and convincing the other party that people employed during the late Middle Ages.[103] Nevertheless, the records suggest that honour and prestige were behind at least some of the cases here. Janne Vandermotten was accused of abducting Lijsken Bollaerts after he had approached her, accompanied by several other men, and spoken to her. According to the act in the bailiff's accounts, he said: 'You have to come with me; I have followed you for a long time'. He took her in his arms, to which she replied: 'Take your hands off me; I do not want to be touched by you. If you put your hand on me again, you will regret it'.[104] Lijsken's determined answer might have been embarrassing for Janne, and it is not clear whether he actually abducted Lijsken. Because she did not want to file a complaint, the case was settled by payment of a composition. The case does suggest that when men went to ask for contact or even marriage, they might have taken their supporters with them, as they did during abductions.

According to the pardon letters, some abductions took place in fiefs ruled by local lords, not in the city. These abductions featured an almost ridiculous number of abductors. Walter Prevenier has already pointed out that political rivalries between alliances of powerful families were mirrored in the phenomenon of abduction in the late medieval urban Low Countries. Many of his case studies based on the pardon letters highlight the appearance of groups of abductors who are charged with violence against their enemies. These groups used abduction as a political tool to bind themselves to certain influential families and force their way into networks that would benefit them politically.[105] Family feuds, still frequent in fifteenth-century cities, provide the context for understanding the collective nature of abductions.

Not all accomplices were armed and actively involved in carrying out the abduction.[106] The sources reveal that some were punished for facilitating the abduction in a more passive manner. I refer to them as 'passive accomplices'

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102 Harris, *Obscene Pedagogies*, 40.

103 Boeles Rowland, 'Material Mnemonics', 63.

104 SAB, CC, no. 12654, June 1417–December 1418, fol. 178rv.

105 See especially his case study of an abduction in fifteenth-century Leuven: Prevenier, 'Huwelijk en clientele', 85–88.

106 About degrees of culpability in Flemish medieval law, see Van Caenegem, *Geschiedenis van het strafrecht*, 38–42.

(Figure 2). They generally assisted in two ways. The first method of helping punished was to influence the future abductee. These accomplices, often but not always women, encouraged the future abductee to participate in the abduction. Above, there are examples of female accomplices punished for this form of complicity, but men were also punished for the same reasons. Pieter Blarinc had to pay a composition to the bailiff for encouraging an anonymous woman *qu'elle s'en alast avec ung compaigne* without the consent of her friends, for example.[107]

In addition, the role of an accomplice is labelled 'passive' if they gave shelter to or hid abductors from the authorities but did not help perpetrate the abduction. Around 1438, Claes de Kersmakere was charged with providing shelter to Hennen Bailge after he had abducted Lijsken Van Ophem.[108] Another act from the Leuven bailiff's accounts shows that a passive accomplice could in fact be victimized by the abductor. In 1473, the Leuven bailiff reached an amicable settlement with Willem Vandenkerkhove. According to the record, Willem and his wife arrived home from the market in the evening to find a woman and a man they did not know.[109] Willem was too afraid to send the abductor and his accomplices away 'because of the cruelty and anger' they displayed. Therefore, the act continues, Willem let the abductors and the abducted woman spend the night in his house, 'even though it was against his will and consent'.[110] The bailiff presented Willem as a victim, but Willem had to pay a composition because he had facilitated the abduction. Another woman was banished for three years for opening a window to admit eight abductors intent on abducting a young girl.[111] The convicted woman probably lived with the abducted girl or worked in her entourage so that she was able to help the men intrude into the girl's domestic environment. The Ghent bailiff even punished a man named Joosse Maes for knowing that Jehan Mappe was planning to abduct a woman but failing to report this to the authorities. Joosse had to pay a settlement of twelve-pound *parisis* for neglecting his civic duty.[112] A similar harsh punishment was inflicted on Cornelis Clais because he had stood by passively as a woman, identified as *jonkvrouw*, was abducted

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107 SAB, CC, no. 14114, May 1438–January 1439, fol. 15v.

108 SAB, CC, no. 12655, December 1438–June 1439, 336v, fol. 375r.

109 SAB, CC, no. 12658, June–December 1473, fol. 75rv: 'binnen zijnen huysse sittene eene vrouwe ende bij huer eenen knecht die welke hij niet en kende'.

110 SAB, CC, no. 12658, June–December 1473, fol. 75rv.

111 SAB, CC, no. 14114, June 1437–May 1438, fol. 14v.

112 SAB, CC, no. 14117, September–October 1478, fol. 189v; Caenegem, *Geschiedenis van het strafrecht*, 41.

from a citizen's house. Cornelis was banished for fifty years from Flanders because he did not call the aldermen.[113]

Those convicted in abduction cases thus played different roles that contributed to the success of the venture. These examples show that the authorities considered abduction a serious offence and all those involved responsible, no matter how small their role. In addition, the collective nature of many abductions, even those labelled as consensual, calls into question the image of abduction as a tool for young people to freely go away together because they wanted a free choice of a spouse. Abduction was not an affair between one man and one woman. Multiple people were usually involved because abductions were complex phenomena entailing property, honour, power and status, sex, and gender. Moreover, it is important to note that there were female abductors and male abductees. These cases indicate that women could also desire 'impossible marriages' and men might also be attractive spouses.

A family affair

The fact that groups of people frequently executed abductions becomes even more significant when considering the relationships between the people involved. Some clues reveal a pattern of abduction by groups of relatives of the abductor and, more surprisingly, of the abductee as well. This pattern can be detected in Heylwige's deposition discussed at the beginning of this chapter: Goeswijn was assisted by his brother and his father was involved, while Heylwige's aunt and some other relatives also played a part.

Many group abductions were perpetrated by men with the same surname, suggesting they were related. For participation in the same abductions, the authorities punished two men called 'Vanderheyden',[114] three men named 'Van Melle',[115] two men named 'Van Gheele' together with two men named Vanderdijle,[116] three men named 'De Vorster',[117] and so on. Other acts specify the precise relationship between these men. For example, when Pierre de Bode abducted and married Katheline Pauwels in Land van Waas, he received help from his brother and father.[118] When Peter de

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113   CAG, S 212, no. 1, fol. 52v (12 May 1481).
114   SAB, CC, no. 12904, 1500, fol. 270rv.
115   CAG, S 212, no. 1, fol. 113r (18 April 1494).
116   SAB, CC, no. 12653, December 1405–April 1406, fol. 87v–88rv.
117   SAB, CC, no. 12655, June–December 1433, fol. 194r.
118   SAB, CC, no. 14112, May–September 1425, fol. 18v.