

Conclusion

Since much of the scholarship on abduction and rape emerged from scholars' interest in past relationships between men and women, they have generally portrayed abduction as an interaction between a male abductor and a female abductee.¹⁴⁸ This image persists in late medieval cultural and legal representations as well. Literary and legal narratives frequently repeated the topos of a man kidnapping a woman because he loves her, a narrative often embedded in the popular theme of the impossible marriage.

Records from the late medieval Low Countries do indeed feature such descriptions, but they also reveal an image of abduction that is much more complex and multi-layered. In its most compact form, abduction was an act between two people. However, by gradually widening the perspective, this chapter has shown that abduction involved multiple people with conflicting interests. Roughly speaking, there were two types. The most prevalent type of abduction was a conflict between two families because one family was trying to give itself access to the other family's prestige and property by forcing a marriage. However, in the second type, some of the abductee's relatives used abduction as a tool to arrange her (or sometimes his) marriage without first obtaining the approval of other relatives with the customary right to be involved in the decision. In both cases, the abduction was a strategy to gain wealth, and the abductee was the gateway. 'The abductor' could be a kin group wanting to push through an advantageous marriage, a man from a middling group, such as a goldsmith, who had a respectable position in society, or a nobleman helped by his political allies. The abductor might even be the target's mother, who wanted to choose her daughter's spouse without having to consult her late husband's relatives. In short, 'the abductor' could be anyone, individual or group, man or woman, chief perpetrator or accomplice, the person who married the abductee or the person who actually moved the abductee from one place to another.

This chapter does not claim that love or desire for free choice of partner never played a role in abduction. After all, the image of the impossible marriage between lovers from different social backgrounds occurs in late medieval cultural and legal narratives and did impact society. However, the danger in adopting this image is that it juxtaposes a rational (male) abductor(s), who used the abduction as a strategy to contract a good marriage, with an emotional (female) abductee, who chose love and personal choice over financial and social stability. These descriptions that arose from

¹⁴⁸ Phillips, 'Written on the Body', 125.

deeply rooted medieval gender concepts should not be uncritically passed on by historians. Men could also fall prey to love and parental coercion, while it was just as important for women to make good strategic marriages as it was for men. The standard representation of abduction might have corresponded to some people's experiences since there was more social pressure on women to select a good spouse. However, it certainly did not account for many other medieval men and women. Even the late medieval records sometimes challenge the highly gendered representation of the man as the aggressor and the woman as the subject by naming women among the abductors and men among the abductees or by using language that assigns an equal degree of responsibility for the abduction marriage to man and woman.

Late medieval society was characterized by networks, dense webs of social ties, and negotiations and family feuds over power and influence. Medieval abductions should not be ripped from their societal context. In place of the binary opposition of men to women, or the individual to the family, it is paramount to acknowledge that many abductions were more complex phenomena often involving many actors, although they are not always immediately visible in the sources.

Works cited

- Archer, Rowena E. 'Rich Old Ladies: The Problem of Late Medieval Dowagers'. In *Property and Politics. Essays in Later Medieval English History*, edited by A.J. Pollard, 15–35. Gloucester, 1984.
- Arnade, Peter, and Walter Prevenier. *Honor, Vengeance, and Social Trouble: Pardon Letters in the Burgundian Low Countries*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015.
- Aurell, Martin, ed. *La parenté déchirée: les luttes intrafamiliales au Moyen Âge*. Turnhout: Brepols, 2010.
- Baatsen, Inneke, and Anke De Meyer. 'Forging or Reflecting Multiple Identities? Analyzing Processes of Identification in a Sample of Fifteenth-Century Letters of Remission from Bruges and Mechelen'. In *L'identité au pluriel: jeux et enjeux des appartenances autour des Pays-Bas 14e-18e siècles*, edited by Violet Soen, Yves Junot, and Florian Mariage, 23–38. Villeneuve d'Ascq: Revue du Nord, 2014.
- Benveniste, Henriette. 'Les enlèvements: stratégies matrimoniales, discours juridique et discours politique en France à la fin du Moyen Âge'. *Revue Historique* 283, no. 1 (1990): 13–35.
- Berents, Dirk Arend. *Het werk van de vos: samenleving en criminaliteit in de late middeleeuwen*. Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1985.