

Chanelle Delameillieure, *Abduction, Marriage and Consent in the Late Medieval Low Countries*. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2024, 254 pp., ISBN 9789463724074).

The forced seizure of women by men to secure a marriage in the late medieval Low Countries is not a unique phenomenon to history. Yet its repeated occurrence – and the social and legal fallout and preoccupations this practice stirred in the Southern Low Countries – is eye-opening nevertheless. Research on the abduction of women in the European late middle ages has largely focused on northern Europe and Italy. Chanelle Delameillieure's empirically rich, shrewdly reasoned book on the forced abduction of women in late medieval Brabant and Flanders is a welcome contribution to the field of women's history, marriage and family history, and social and cultural history more generally. This reworking and expansion of her original University of Leuven dissertation is among the best works of scholarship on the practice of the forced marriage of women by men and their allies, which could sometimes include women too. Using an impressive range of urban and regional archival documents – city registers, bailiff accounts, legal rulings, notarial archives, political decrees, pardon letters, and episcopal court rulings – Delameillieure lets the sources, diverse and complex, guide her analysis. She wisely resists easy assumptions in her study, alert to the complexity of the social world that gave rise to such abductions, and the silences and gaps in the records that renders their interpretation challenging.

The men and their allies – typically the 'friends and associates' tied to kin groups and those close to them – who abducted women focused on two social categories: young single women or recently widowed women, both of whom were associated with material assets and social advantage. These women they violently seized and typically married in a hastily arranged ceremony, whether formally before a priest or by exchanging vows, regularly before assembled witnesses. In many instances, the abductee signed a consent statement before a legal official, especially if the marriage had come under criticism or legal challenge by the abductee herself or her family or guardians. Scholars who had studied this practice for the Low Countries and elsewhere, especially England and France, have puzzled through the reasons for marriages by abduction, interpreting most cases as efforts at cementing social alliances among families and of the desire to 'marry up' by the seizure of a woman with known assets. Given the communal inheritance legal regimes of the Low Countries, women, whether single or especially if widowed, might command considerable financial and immovable wealth, making them attractive targets. But scholars have likewise interpreted

some of these abductions as thinly camouflaged elopements of young lovers seeking to escape unattractive arranged marriages, citing as evidence legal testimony over the marriage's legality of the free consent of both parties to the abduction, and indications of romantic involvement previously between the couple.

The issue of consent by abducted women is at the heart of Delameillieure's scholarly attention. She brings a healthy skepticism to assumptions that women had some range of free choice. In the book's four substantial chapters, she charts the social and cultural world of the late medieval Southern Low Countries and the family, property, and marital regimes that yielded the practice of coerced marriages through the physical seizure of a bride. Considerable attention is given to the body of political and legal responses to abductions by urban and regional authorities. The varied, imprecise legal language in France, England and the Low Countries by which abductions were described especially render their study complex. For the Low Countries, the Middle Dutch equivalent of abduction, *ontscaken*, regularly cited in Dutch-language sources, had plural meanings like its French (*ravissement, enlever, prendre*) or English equivalents (ravishments, rape). A *schaec* could be either voluntary or involuntary, reflecting the same latitude in meaning that itself complicated the legal discussions around marriages that were the result of a seizure, where the lines between choice and coercion were far from cleanly distinguishable.

Given the legal murkiness around abduction in terms of classification of voluntary or involuntary, Delameillieure is especially attentive to the subjective experience of the abducted women themselves – their vulnerabilities and attempted remedies. In doing so, she makes it clear that even when a woman might sign a consent decree after the abduction, as the rich sources for Leuven in particular indicate, they were hardly free agents, but were instead hemmed in by family and societal pressures and expectations. Marriage by abduction generally posed serious problems to both families and urban and regional political regimes, resulting in civic and princely legislative decrees – the first already in 1191 – with fiscal penalties and capital punishment threatened against abductors and their allies. For families of all socio-economic backgrounds, for whom marriages were carefully negotiated affairs among kin and social networks, a coerced marriage disrupted the closely guarded authority of parents, guardians and their allies.

Apart from Delameillieure's caution around notions of female consent and her empirical harvest of hundreds of newly-examined cases of abduction, she also chips away at the supposed fixed binary between secular practices around marriage and canon law. Here the matter of the free exchange of vows was paramount, leading previous scholars, most famously George Duby, to argue for two models of marriage in the middle ages that clashed in terms of application and practice. Delameillieure examines 113 court cases in three diocesan courts, of which 96 were in Brussels and the remainder in Liège

and Cambrai. She finds reality more complicated. While episcopal judges could dissolve a forced marriage owing to the lack of the woman's consent, in most instances they did not, since the future vows of consent merely needed enforcement to conclude a valid marriage. This said, these judges did issue fines for the lack of parental consent. In fact, Delameillieure finds it rare that a consistory court dissolved a marriage even when the issue of coercion was at play.

More than anything else, Delameillieure's valuable study underscores that rather than two models of marriage, secular and ecclesiastical, and rather than clear boundaries of choice and constraint between two individuals, the abductor and abductee, the reality is that abductions were plural affairs. They involved group and family interests and conflicts. They also reflected the broader social world in which seizing women to force a marriage was attractive enough to convince men to pursue this course for social and material advantage, thereby leaving the abductee herself with limited choices about how to respond. In this respect, this book is more than about the practice of coerced marriages. The study interprets such a phenomenon as a tissue of the larger social world in which families and individuals jockeyed for social influence and strategic alliances, often at the cost of young women and widows. Delameillieure's book, a rich case study, might have concluded by placing her cases and empirical evidence in a broader late-medieval European context to answer the question whether these urban Low Country cases were different from coerced marriages and abductions elsewhere, and if so, how. Did the property and inheritance regimes of the Southern Low Countries, with varieties of partible inheritance, make the practice more common there than in other northern European societies, or in the dowry-based marriage and inheritance practices of the Italian territories in the south? The reader is presented with a marvelous and deeply researched book about core areas of the Southern Low Countries. Yet it is the strength of the evidence and interpretations that raises questions about how these cases differ from elsewhere in the societies of the late middle ages where marriage and marriage arrangements mattered critically.

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