

*Stolen Women in Medieval England:  
Rape, Abduction and Adultery, 1100-1500*  
by Caroline Dunn

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Modern fictional representations of the Middle Ages often depict medieval women as kidnapped: Marian in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* and Gwen in *Merlin*, the BBC adaptation of Arthurian romance. The romances of the late medieval period have inspired these depictions as they contain examples of (noble) women being stolen away from their families and/or homes. Caroline Dunn, however, asks if these common depictions of theft reflect the reality for women in late Medieval England. In her book *Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction and Adultery, 1100-1500*, she examines primary sources in order to understand the frequency of abductions, sexual violations and elopements, all of which were classed as 'theft' by contemporary law makers. From this, she draws conclusions on the legal processes which controlled the female body, and suggests that these could be manipulated by women to give volume to their normally silenced voices. The resulting study is relevant for historians and literary critics, particularly those interested in women or sexual activity in late medieval England.

Both abduction and rape were punished under the *raptus* statutes in medieval England. The introduction to *Stolen Women* provides a literary review of previous scholarship on *raptus*, and discusses the legal sources used within the study – Patent Rolls, court records from the Welsh Marcher Lordship of Dyffryn Clwyd, the *Curia Regis Rolls* and eyre records (p.7). Dunn also credibly explains her decision to exclude some cases pertaining to abducted wards, stolen servants, and abductions made for ransom, citing lack of significant evidence and/or gender neutrality to justify the omission.

In her use of evidence throughout the text the author demonstrates her awareness of the potentially fictional nature of court accounts. In the introduction she states that legal documents are 'constructed narratives stating what victims, defendants, and juries

believed happened' (p.5), a theory she repeats as she de-constructs individual cases. At the same time, she also draws attention to the impersonal nature of court accounts, stating that the structure of legal documents hid male emotional responses to abductions, and suggesting that previous scholarship has perceived this as a lack of empathy for women (p.97). The consistent attention paid to the potential problems of written legal sources gives credit to Dunn's search for the truth behind each document.

As late medieval law conflated abduction and rape under one statute, it is essential that this monograph examines both crimes. Dunn's first chapter uses linguistic evidence from legal documents to illustrate how abduction and rape (though different crimes in modern legal definition) were punished by the same legislation, effectively treating them as one and the same. She provides a detailed account of the terminology of English legal narratives, and plots its changing use through the latter Middle Ages.

Having grounded her research in linguistic analysis, the author proceeds to structure her research around types of 'stolen' women, including instances of rape, abduction and forced marriage, elopement, adultery, and finally retaliating and malicious legal proceedings. This structure suits the complex subject matter, as it both acknowledges differing modern interpretations of these crimes/sins whilst considering the medieval conflation found in the primary evidence. In the chapter on adultery, for example, she highlights that the indictment of the cleric Richard Mareschal, who was charged with the abduction of Stephen de Hereford's wife, clearly specifies that this was an adulterous consensual relationship between Richard and the wife. There was no forcible removal of the wife that would indicate abduction in the modern sense. Dunn, however, illustrates that, as the husband had not given his consent to the relationship, this was considered abduction by *raptus* law (p.124-126). By organising her evidence around modern definitions, Dunn exposes the multiple uses of *raptus* law and achieves clarity in her explanations of the medieval conflation of rape, adultery, elopement and abduction. It is this clarity that is the greatest strength of this monograph, making it extremely useful to scholars as a way of accessing and understanding the treatment of female sexual activity in the legal processes of late medieval England.

In the introduction of the monograph Dunn states that the goal of her study is to record 'ways in which female agency could, on occasion, manoeuvre around...[male] controls' (p.17). She focuses on the idea that women could arrange false abductions to choose their own marriage partner, an idea which would illuminate a female voice that had been hidden behind previous scholarly readings of medieval women as victims.

This intention is, however, problematic as it contradicts other conclusions put forward by Dunn. She states that the availability of clandestine marriages meant that young couples 'rarely resorted to fictitious abductions' (p.119). She also examines the damage to a woman's reputation and future marriage prospects that resulted from *raptus* accusations. The monograph does not, however, consider the impact of this evidence upon the idea of arranged abductions. Similarly, Dunn does not consider evidence put forward by marriage historians, such as Payling, which suggests that it was economically beneficial and an accepted social norm for women to allow their families to select a marriage partner (Payling 2001, p.413). While it cannot be denied that there are records which suggest female agency had a role in *raptus* accusations, some conclusions drawn by Dunn seem to contradict the overall emphasis on arranged abductions present throughout this text.

*Stolen Women* offers a detailed examination of rape and abduction in English legal records. It goes beyond current legal historical research by considering all crimes punished by *raptus* law, rather than focusing on primarily on abduction and rape. This focus on wider female sexuality (as opposed to focusing on one element) also compliments recent work on medieval sexuality, such as Karras' *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*. The structure of *Stolen Women* makes it an excellent introduction to the complexities of medieval law and the conflation of rape, abduction, crime and sin in late medieval England. The intention of the monograph to demonstrate female agency in arranged abductions unfortunately creates some questions that are left unanswered. Despite this, the detailed examination of sources helps to clarify the different types of crime that were prosecuted as *raptus*, how they were prosecuted, and the varying and evolving terminology used in such cases. This evidence will be invaluable to scholars in historical and literary studies of medieval English women.

#### Bibliography

Payling, S.J. 2001. The Economics of Marriage in Late Medieval England: The Marriage of Heiresses. In *The Economic History Review*, 54 (3). 413-429.

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