

*Stolen Women in Medieval England: Rape, Abduction, and Adultery, 1100–1500*, by Caroline Dunn. Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, 4th series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xi+261. ISBN: 9781107017009. \$99.00.

IN THIS INTERESTING and well-written book, Caroline Dunn examines how the laws meant to prohibit and punish the overlapping sexual offences of rape, abduction, and adultery in medieval England greatly affected marriage formation and dissolution. Based on court cases, legal petitions, royal letters and pardons, and secular law codes, Dunn reveals the experiences and the motivations behind the rape, forced marriage, consensual abduction (i.e. elopement), wife-theft, spousal desertion, and retaliatory kidnappings of women. Her unique study of ravishment highlights the agency of women prosecuting their rapists, choosing marriage partners, and arranging their abductions to elope or abandon a spouse, and at the same time emphasizes the attempts of secular authorities, husbands, and male guardians to control women's behavior and sexuality.

In the first chapter, Dunn traces the changes in the meaning of the legal term *raptus* (to seize) from Roman times to the fifteenth century in English legislation and usage. She illustrates that prior to 1275 the Latin verb *rapere* was employed to denote sexual assault, but by the late thirteenth century *raptus*, now more frequently paired with *abductus* (to lead away), was used to describe abduction rather than rape. Dunn points to the introduction of Gratian's *Decretum* in England and legal statutes concerned with the forcible or consensual abduction of women, particularly the use of the formula "*rapuit et abduxit*," to show that the king's legislation was targeting abduction and not sexual assault. While scholars have previously interpreted this legislation as minimizing the crime of rape, Dunn argues that the ability to bring rape charges before the courts "continued as before, so that a victim of sexual assault retained her right of recourse" (40).

The second chapter focuses primarily on the prosecution of rape in legal records. Dunn argues against scholars who view the high rates of acquittal for rapists as a sign that authorities did not consider rape a serious crime because "low conviction rates were common for all crimes, not just rape" (75). She points to the practice of private settlements and concludes that women seem to have preferred a monetary payment that could enhance a dowry instead of the trauma of a trial as a contributing factor to the dearth of convictions. Dunn claims that male jurors and justices did not convict alleged offenders because they believed that the punishment of execution or mutilation was too harsh. She

offers this as an explanation for low conviction rates and a reason why scholars should not presume that these men were not concerned with prosecuting the crime of rape. Yet, Dunn undermines her argument by later revealing that the prescribed punishment for rape was rarely enforced. If execution or mutilation for convicted rapists was seldom carried out, then such fears seem exaggerated, and this cannot explain away the low conviction rates for rape. The chapter also highlights some common trends in respect to perpetrators and victims, such as higher-status rapists and lower-status victims, as well as the circumstances surrounding assaults, such as location and time of day.

Dunn shows in the third chapter how the attempt of lawmakers to curb elopement in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries negatively affected women who were the victims of abduction and forced marriage since they could not accuse their abductors/rapists once the marriage had been solemnized. Fifteenth-century legislation, however, eventually dealt with deterring and punishing kidnappers. Dunn notes that abductors were looking to improve their socio-economic status by targeting upper-class women, and stresses that the abduction of widows was just as common as that of maidens. Widows were less heavily guarded by male relatives or guardians and had easier access to their dower, property, and goods, thus making them more vulnerable to abduction and forced marriage because of their financial independence. The fourth chapter illuminates incidents of “willing elopement” masked as forced abduction. Dunn argues that the reluctant acceptance of clandestine marriage and its frequent practice in England meant that few couples needed to concoct a fictitious abduction. Not surprisingly, maidens were more likely to elope than widows because they were constrained by the wishes of their parents. Couples who staged a forced abduction risked disinheritance, and the groom faced possible prosecution by the bride’s family, but their union, despite the objection of parents, could not be dissolved.

The fifth chapter deals with the prosecution of abduction in secular courts as a way to punish female adultery, protect husbands’ property rights, and enforce the marital bond. Cuckolded husbands used anti-abduction laws to publicize a wife’s adultery and prevent her from inheriting a dower. Dunn shows that many of these cases of wife-theft were in actuality spousal desertions and that husbands could cooperate with their wives’ attempts to leave a marriage. She underscores the extent to which medieval people found ways to divorce themselves and “achieve a greater level of marital fluidity” when Church law made it so difficult for couples to legally dissolve their marriage (160). In the sixth chapter, Dunn reveals how the abduction of women could be used as a tool

to enact revenge, insult a political rival, coerce the repayment of a debt, or to force a particular resolution in a dispute over property. In the same vein, false allegations of abduction were used to harass enemies, force them to court, and burden them with the trials of the court system. Dunn also finds that clerics were often the targets of malicious ravishment allegations and explains that such allegations expressed a community's censure of sexual misbehavior. This may be the case, but it is very odd that Dunn does not address who brought these allegations against clergymen to support her argument that communities disapproved of sexually active clerics. Was it the supposed victim, nosy neighbors, or the town's leaders? There is more to flesh out here, particularly since clerics involved with married women, rather than single or widowed, were more likely to be accused of ravishment.

The strength of Dunn's study lies in her cogent analysis of sources and how she connects this evidence to changes in the legal statutes and culture in England. Despite a brief discussion of the punishment of adultery in Italian city-states, however, Dunn does not situate her findings on ravishment in a wider European context. This is particularly unfortunate in the chapters on bride-theft and consensual elopement, which are based on a limited amount of data and could have been bolstered by including sources from outside of England. Nonetheless, Dunn's book is an important contribution to the little studied topic of ravishment and offers new insights on the crimes of rape and abduction as well as the clever ways in which the laity maneuvered in and out of marital unions.

*Michelle Armstrong-Partida*  
*University of Texas at El Paso*