

Kathryn A. Sloan. *Runaway Daughters: Seduction, Elopement, and Honor in Nineteenth-Century Mexico*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008. Pp. 244. Paper \$27.95.

Kathryn A. Sloan uses nineteenth-century *rapto* or “abduction by seduction,” cases from Oaxaca, Mexico to analyze courtship practices, free will, and honor among the indigenous and *mestizo* working-class. Sloan, an Associate Professor of History at the University of Arkansas, argues that this practice became an increasingly popular practice for adolescents to gain independence and emancipation from parental control during the *Porfiriato*, the regime of President Porfirio Diaz from 1876 to 1911. She contends that the Mexican government played a pivotal role in this phenomenon, promoting modernity and individual liberty in a traditional culture. These modern ideals are evident in the abduction cases when liberal judges ruled in favor of eloped couples and recognizing their independence.

Rapto traditionally involved a young woman tricked or forced into sexual relations or elopement with a man who promised her marriage. Sloan shows that working-class girls planned their own *rapto* and engaged in sexual relations in order to force parental acceptance of a marriage partner. Parents were prone to agree to a previously contested marriage if their daughter’s virtue had already been compromised. *La Reforma* laws of the mid-nineteenth century created an anti-clerical state that privatized communal lands, promoted individual liberty, and identified foreign investment as key features of modernization. The liberal government of the *Porfiriato* took a strong stance against child abuse by enacting laws to protect the young. The laws allowed youth to rebel, declaring their independence and often cited parental abuse as justification for their emancipation. These cases served to increase the state’s power and to promote liberalism and modernity in Porfirian Mexico. As a result, the government extended individual liberty to the youth at the expense of parental control and tradition.

Sloan examines 212 court cases of *rapto*, love letters, popular literature, and art that, when viewed together, reflect the changing social views of postcolonial Mexico. Organized thematically in chapters on Oaxaca’s history, law, popular culture, courtship and gossip, family, and sexual honor, she argues that the Zapotec and Mixtec indigenous groups have traditionally awarded women a greater degree of political and social power, with gender complementarity playing a key role in community organization. This structure nurtured desire for personal independence among women in Oaxaca, allowing *rapto* to become an instrument for freedom in the wake of the liberal legal reforms of the nineteenth-century *Porfiriato*.

Sloan explains that some adolescent girls became genuine victims of seduction, allowing themselves to be deflowered by men who promised love and future marriage. When these girls brought their cases before the court, the men manipulated the law, claiming the young girl was not a virgin when they had sexual relations and refused to marry her. The court often looked to the community to decide such cases, allowing neighbors and family members to denounce or attest to a young girl’s respectability, honor, and courtship practices. Sloan suggests that honor was a multifaceted social construction, dependent on community values and public perception.

Sloan’s case studies create a beautifully written social history of the working-class youth in *Porfirian* Oaxaca. It supplements the existing historiography of the era by

offering insights on courtship, honor, and daily life among the masses through their interactions with the court. Her work identifies female agency in nineteenth-century Mexico, arguing that working-class youths frequently asserted their independence and defied parental authority through *raptos* and manipulation of reform laws. The monograph will serve as an innovative addition to the study of gender relations and social history in modern Mexico.

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