The twelfth-century Latin “comedies” simultaneously condone rape (reflecting the school culture in which they were used to teach the trivium to young boys) and condemn it (reflecting the new concern for consent among canon lawyers).

The interest in rape in the lives of medieval authors, as well as in medieval literature itself, has grown in recent years. Christopher Cannon has explored the exact nature of the charge of raptus from which Geoffrey Chaucer was released, and its implication for the treatment of rape in his poetry. Kathryn Gravdal, in Ravishing Maidens: Writing Rape in Medieval French Literature and Law, has argued that in the genres of pastourelle and beast fable, rape is often tolerated, if not actually relished.

Few, however, have noticed that another medieval genre, the little known medieval Latin works referred to variously as “comedies,” “elegiac comedies,” and “Latin comic tales,” often use rape as either a plot device or a subtext, generally to condone or euphemize it.

Most of the medieval Latin comedies were written by clerics in northern France during the twelfth-century revival of classical learning as rhetorical exercises for adolescent males learning the trivium. While there is no consensus as to what their exact genre was or whether they were enacted dramatically, it is agreed that the comedies are short narratives in Latin elegiac verse with a plain style and a happy ending. Their plots involve a clever intrigue, often a sexual one in which a husband is duped by either another man or his own wife. Generically they have often been compared to the Latin and vernacular fabliaux, which they resemble in presenting women as lustful, whether sexually aggressive or merely compliant.
of the comedies that deal with rape justify it implicitly with assumption that it is women's true desire; these include Geta, Aida, De Tribus Puellis, and De Nuncio Sagaci. One, however, Pamphilus, complicates the misogynistic attitude by attending to the woman's feelings and by including her voice.

These two attitudes in the comedies show the influence of opposing strands of thought in the twelfth century. The first view, that women want to be raped, had long been held in the Middle Ages, while the second, that women, as well as men, desired and deserved a choice in partners, was much newer, being debated at the time by theologians and canon lawyers. The first attitude was actually inculcated in the medieval schoolroom, where both the pedagogical practices and the curriculum itself had the effect of normalizing violence. Rita Copeland has written that the "countless images of the medieval school room and . . . the iconography of Lady Grammar herself, often depicted with flagellum in hand" remind us that "the teaching of grammar is inextricably linked in ancient and medieval imagination with violence to the body." Furthermore, as Marjorie Curry Woods has pointed out in her insightful article "Rape and the Pedagogical Rhetoric of Sexual Violence," rape was an actual plot device in many school texts. She suggests that given their regular experience with corporal punishment, young students in the process of forming masculine identities would have been led to identify with both the victims and the perpetrators of rape in such texts. Although, as will be seen below, I believe that Pamphilus presents the woman's situation with more sympathy than Woods acknowledges, her argument is persuasive for most of the other medieval Latin comedies.

The second attitude towards rape in the comedies was influenced by theories propounded in the twelfth century by Gratian and other canon lawyers and implemented by Pope Alexander III—that consent won by persuasion rather than force was essential to forming a good marriage. Such theories supported a couple's freedom from parental intervention in choosing spouses, and while showing more interest in marriage than in rape, indicated a climate in clerical circles in which sexual violence was coming under criticism. Even in practice, James Brundage has argued, rape was becoming less widespread among aristocratic men as a means of gaining wives:

Suitors wishing to win the hand of a lady whose parents opposed their wooing were beginning to find more subtle ways of securing their goal. Where such a suitor a century earlier might have abducted the woman and pressed his suit by force and intimidation, early twelfth-century males seem to have been more inclined to resort to charm, blandishments, and acts of valor to win over the lady's heart. Ravishment was giving way to seduction as the preferred method of capturing an heiress against her family's wishes.