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[00:00:00] **Jack Schneider:** Welcome to *HEQ&A*, the podcast of the *History of Education Quarterly*. I'm your host, *HEQ* co-editor Jack Schneider. Every few weeks, we'll dive into recent work from the journal, asking authors how their projects challenge or extend what we know about a topic, exploring what's interesting and surprising about it, and then taking a step back to consider broader implications. In the second half of the show, we turn our sights to teaching. So, if you're an educator, make sure to stick around until the end. And now let's hear from one of our authors.

[00:00:50] **Megan Hall:** Hi, my name is Megan J. Hall, the Assistant Director of the Medieval Institute at the University of Notre Dame. “Could women read in the Middle Ages?” “Were they educated?” These are two of the biggest questions I've asked about my research. And in this article, I offer some answers to those questions.

[00:01:07] I specialize in the literary study of the Middle Ages in England. So I focus in the centuries between the Norman conquest of 1066 and the dissolution of the monasteries in the late 1530s, which was one of the major events that brought the medieval era to an end in England. I discuss a range of texts, manuscript, and archival evidence for girls and young women learned in these five centuries and the settings in which they learned. The education of girls was carried out in households, elementary schools, and nunneries as well as through appointment and apprenticeship. Girls were taught a wide range of subjects depending on their socioeconomic status, including practical skills, reading comprehension in French, English, and often Latin, and social accomplishments.

[00:01:54] This topic--medieval girls' education--is really an understudied one. There hasn't been a single monograph written on the history of medieval English schooling for girls. Rather, the topic only really gets attention in essays, book chapters in notes, and often only briefly at that, since most discussion of female education is encapsulated within discussions of education broadly. And the greatest attention is paid to male education. And that's in part because there's so much more evidence for that. My work here brings together research that I've done in medieval manuscripts and archives and scouring the archival work of the many excellent scholars who have also worked on history of education.

[00:02:35] What makes my particular project unique is its tight focus on female education. It's grounded in my larger work in women's literary history. I also take the focus strictly off of nunneries, which are often where the study of women's literacy in the Middle Ages is centered, in part, again, because of higher numbers of surviving records. But I widened this area of inquiry to all women, not just religious. I also look at all sorts of levels of socioeconomic status. This project is also one of the only ones that I have encountered that works at the intersection of the history of education, the history of literacy, and particularly of the lay literacy, and the social history of women.

[00:03:19] There are terrific scholars working in all of these areas. And I have brought in much of their work here, but I combine this body of wonderful scholarship with original evidence from the archives that I've uncovered to focus specifically on female education and

not many scholars do this. I also, in my essay, refer out to several recent articles I've published that have even more detail about this original archival work.

[00:03:45] When I began my work a number of years ago, when I was first training to be a medievalist, I was, like many of my readers, unsure about how educated women could be in the Middle Ages. I continue to be surprised by the results of my own research and seeing what a wide range of educational opportunities were available for women. They were trained in multiple languages as English and French were the most common medieval vernaculars in England. They could also be taught to read very sophisticated Latin. Women owned lots of different kinds of books, especially in the latter half of the period. And girls could also learn to write, which is important to note in the medieval period. That's a completely different skill from reading and they were not taught together by, by rule. Girls could also go to school up to a certain level and they could even be co-educated with boys. So much of this literacy training, of course, depended on a girl's socioeconomic situation, as well as how useful the skills of reading or writing would have been for a woman's livelihood or for her social standing.

[00:04:47] So a business woman might've needed to keep shop records, but not read Plato, for example, while a royal princess would likely have been trained to read Latin, but not necessarily to write for herself. Some of the most highly educated women we encounter are in medieval literature. At least four literary romances of the 12th and 13th centuries, which I discuss in the article credit their heroines with basically being given a university level education. Saint Catherine of Alexandria, in her 13th century, early middle English, *Saint's Life*, is described as an “icuret clergesse,” which translates as a distinguished female scholar. Catherine's father took care that she was well-educated, tutored by advanced male masters from the university. So that in her debate with the emperor Maxentius, she quotes scripture and Latin and offers an English translation and reveals that she's been trained in the classics: Homer, Aristotle, Euscalapius, Galen, and Plato, although she rejects them all in favor of reading scripture.

[00:05:46] Since these are literary figures, of course, we have to read them discerningly. But we do have a good number of records from the aristocratic classes that show us the education of royal women in the real world could certainly be advanced like that, of those literary figures. For example, the Norman monk and chronicler Robert of Torigni. He died in 1186. He praised the education of St. Margaret of Scotland and her daughter Matilda. And he wrote, "Of how great holiness and learning, secular as well as spiritual, were these two queens, Margaret, and Matilda." And in *A Different Latin Life*, commissioned by Matilda about her mother Margaret, that biographer described Margaret from her childhood, how she would "occupy herself with the study of holy scriptures and delightfully exercise her mind." And the biographer also notes, interestingly, that her husband King Malcolm the Third of Scotland could not himself read Latin.

[00:06:41] One of the most important jobs that I hope my work does is to help combat harmful gender stereotypes. So many people today believe the false and circular argument that women couldn't read in the Middle Ages simply because they were women. And these kinds of beliefs inform really modern, systemic gender discrimination in developed

countries, discriminatory gender practices show up in pay inequality, women cast in typed roles in the workplace, the glass ceiling, sexual harassment, and other mistreatments, but in developing countries, it's not having access to basic and equal education, being denied the right to earn a living rather than being assigned to wife and or motherhood at an early age and similar detriments. As a medievalist, I have an opportunity to advocate for girl's education by recovering--and I call it "recovering" because the evidence hasn't changed, simply our awareness of it--recovering and updating the narrative to reflect a more accurate picture of women's literacy.

[00:07:38] It used to be believed in Medieval Studies as well that women were uneducated with rare exception. Now, thanks to the work that early 20th century scholars like Eileen Power have done, and her work has been carried on by so many more. We know that this is absolutely not true. When we can better understand the truth behind these gender-based discriminatory narratives, then I think we stand a chance of improving the treatment of women around the world. It's critical that we go back to the historical record and the literary record, which is where my work lies, as a crucial source of evidence for gathering this information and doing our best to read it in a light that is as free from preconceived notions as possible. And this is ambitious as a goal for my work, obviously, but I think it's important and it's really the highest call of scholarship to look at the evidence and see what it says rather than looking for evidence to support an idea or disprove an idea. And the evidence very clearly tells us that women could be educated.

[00:08:43] **Jack Schneider:** The second half of the show is dedicated to thinking about teaching. We ask authors to put on their guest lecturer hats and take students into the weeds. What should they pay attention to, methodologically speaking? What else should they be reading if they want to take a deep dive into the historiography? And where are there opportunities for further research?

[00:09:02] **Megan Hall:** So the methodologies for Medieval Studies and particularly this kind of work that I do require interdisciplinary flexibility and training. And that's one of the things I love about this work, that it requires me to be a textual scholar, a material culturalist, a theologian, an analyst of medieval architecture, an archaeologist, and an archival expert. And all of those hats are fun to wear--it's why I love doing what I do. First and foremost research like mine requires an ability to work with primary sources. Not all sources have been translated, much less transcribed. So I have to be able to go into an archive, locate what I need and read it. Which is a little trickier than it might sound on the surface. For the study of medieval England this means training in languages, such as Old and Middle English, Anglo-Norman, and Latin. It also requires the skills of paleography, which is the study of ancient writing systems, and codicology, which is the study of manuscript books and also diplomatics, which is the study of historical documents, and all of those come together in studying the Middle Ages.

[00:10:07] The evidence that I use to support my arguments, I get from texts and textual constructs, such as literature, wills, law codes, and archival records. And it also comes from material culture, such as manuscripts art, buildings, and objects. So I have to be trained to understand and employ analytical skills in all of these areas. When interpreting texts, for

example, their meaning and significance can't be separated from the physical objects in which they survive, such as manuscript books or loose booklets or scrolls. And that's a whole different topic, which I would love to get into today, but don't have time for. Both the text and the material that they're recorded on give us some valuable information and need to be examined together. We need to know what the text tells us, and we can do that through literary critical theories, such as close reading, historicism, new historicism, new criticism, feminist criticism, and reader response criticism. You can see, you have a lot of criticisms to choose from.

[00:11:08] When we examine a text, such as the *Chronicle* that Robert of Torigni wrote about Queens Margaret and Matilda that I talked about earlier. Can we take it at face value that both women were of great holiness and learning as Robert writes? Or do we need to be at all critical in our examination of that statement? Did Robert have an agenda that would inform what he said. Can we confirm this statement with other historical sources? All of the types of literary criticism I named earlier will help us understand what we can glean from the text that's relevant to our research. In this case, we also have multiple other sources of confirmation from the historical record. We have other chronicles--of course these are literary--we have records that are both secular and ecclesiastical. We have landmarks and we have actual books that survived from Margaret's collection. So we're able to confirm from a variety of different disciplines that we can trust, to a certain degree, these assertions by her chroniclers.

[00:12:03] We also need to know how the text is written down, who wrote it out? How luxurious were the materials? For whom was this text written? And how did that book or booklet survive to the present day? What did readers write in the margins? And what does that tell us? There are so many important details in the relationship between text and manuscript book. And this is where I gather the bulk of my evidence.

[00:12:27] So there are a few different subject areas that are really important to become conversant in for this topic. And the history of education in England is one of the most important ones to begin with. There is some early work on this by Nicholas Carlisle and A.F. Leach, and their work has been significantly updated since they wrote, but it is worth getting to know these foundational authors. But Nicholas Orme is perhaps the most important scholar to know in this area. And he's also the most prolific. Most of his works include sections--and some of them are quite hefty--on the education of girls. His book *From Childhood to Chivalry: The Education of the English Kings and Aristocracy*, is one in which Orme focuses on the High and Late Middle Ages. And he has some careful inclusions and analysis of female education. His *English Schools in the Middle Ages* was superseded by his *Medieval Schools from Roman Britain to Renaissance England*. And in both of those, he looks helpfully at what relation education had to all strata of society. From nobility to the lanes and he gives an overview of how schools developed in England and what they taught. Although the latter is quite limited in its attention to girls. His book *Medieval Children* also contains two important chapters "Learning to Read" and "Reading for Pleasure" that provide critical information on girls' education.

[00:13:49] Alongside these works three other stand out to me for particular focus on the education of women. Eileen Power's foundational *Medieval English Nunneries* book needs to be read alongside David Bell's much more recent landmark study *What Nuns Read*, and these two together give a really important picture of what education was like in the nunnery for girls. Dorothy Gardiner also, much earlier in the 20th century, wrote a book called *English Girlhood at School*, which is the first book to survey the education of English girls from the Anglo-Saxon era into the modern age. Only a few chapters are devoted to the medieval period, but they're very helpful. I also recommend other works by Power: *Medieval People*, and *Medieval Women*, which both cover our topics in great detail. John Lawson and Harold Silver also wrote *A Social History of Education in England*, and that also is a broad look at society and education from the Anglo-Saxon period to the modern period, and it includes sections on girls.

[00:14:48] There are some, more recent authors such as Barbara Hanawalt, Daniel Klein and Mary D.L. Bailey, who talk about this topic as well. On the history of literacy in England, no work is more important than that of Michael Clanchy. His publication of *From Memory To Written Record: England, 1066 to 1307* really set off a major shift in literacy studies. And in that work, he traces the shifting uses and practices and valuation of literacy in post conquest England. His exploration of the literacy of the laity, and particularly his consideration of women's literacy, make this work a real cornerstone in the exploration of female education in high medieval England. And this is in its third or fourth edition at present--it's been around for a long time. Key in this field as well, I would say, is the work of Malcolm Parks. He proposed a range of reading abilities for understanding literacy rather than the binary structure of literate versus illiterate. And, finally, Jo Ann Hoeppner Moran Cruz does an important, deep dive work into the records of York schools. She fleshes out the educational life of late medieval York, and particularly in the process, she can reflect on the general education of boys and girls, and especially elementary education, which is a really understudied angle of the history of literacy.

[00:16:09] There are so many opportunities to conduct further research on this topic. Both my methodologies and the topic itself can be taken up by anyone who's interested. Students can apply any of the literary critical theories I discussed to texts that interest them, particularly those that are written by and for women. Some of the texts I would put on that list are *The Book of Margery Kempe*, the *Ancrene Wisse*, which is really my area of deeper specialty, Julian of Norwich, Christine de Pizan and Marie de France and the Katherine and Wooing Groups of texts, which might not be quite as well known to some students, but are very important as they were written for women in the vernacular in medieval England.

[00:16:49] A number of the manuscripts in which these texts survive are also freely available in high-quality digitized format from sources like the British Library, so that students of any experience level can become familiar with working with medieval manuscripts, which is so much fun. Students who want to learn about manuscript analysis will find helpful models for how I approach legal texts and their manuscripts in three additional articles of mine, which as I mentioned earlier, I footnoted in the essay. And in those pieces, I take a really deep dive into codicological analysis, looking deeply at the manuscript itself as an object.

[00:17:25] And I show in those articles how a holistic analysis of the text and the manuscript together reveal new information about the texts under examination. Once students are comfortable with primary sources and archival tools, there is plenty more work to be done and going through texts and archives with an eye to locating new examples and evidence of educational practices for girls, women's book ownership, laws about education, records of women's school teachers, records about local schools, especially elementary schools outside of the church. And there's so many more areas that can be investigated. Archival records exist at the local, county, and national levels in England. And there are so many that have yet to be examined. This might surprise students to learn that there are so many records that just haven't been looked at and need to be a bit more accessible is the text series published by the Early English Text Society. Those are widely available in libraries. They contain many literary texts that were published a hundred years ago, but have never really been analyzed, and that could be a rich source of material. There is still so much work to be done in this topic and there is room for everyone.

[00:18:42] **Jack Schneider:** Check out *History of Education Quarterly* online. The journal is published by Cambridge University Press and it's carried by most academic libraries. You should also be sure to follow *HEQ* Twitter handle: @histedquarterly, which regularly sends out free read-only versions of articles, and the show's Twitter handle @HEQandA. And don't forget, subscribe to the show so you don't miss forthcoming episodes. We're available on iTunes, Stitcher, and wherever you get your podcasts. HEQ&A is produced at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Our producer is Jennifer Berkshire and our theme music is by Ryan Shaw. I'm Jack Schneider. Thanks for joining us.