

Hall Final Podcast Episode

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SPEAKERS

Dr. Megan J. Hall, Ben Pykare, Will Beattie



Will Beattie 00:05

I'm Will Beattie.



Ben Pykare 00:07

And I'm Ben Pykare.



Will Beattie 00:08

And we're two graduate students here at the University of Notre Dame's Medieval Institute.



Ben Pykare 00:13

We're here to chat with students and scholars of the medieval world about what they do and how they came to do it.



Will Beattie 00:18

So who have we got today, Ben?



Ben Pykare 00:20

Well, today we're sitting down with Dr. Megan Hall, Assistant Director of the Medieval Institute here at Notre Dame. We're here to talk to her today about her journey to and through academia, as well as her recent publication, "Women's Education and Literacy in England from 1066 to 1540."



Will Beattie 00:38

Wellthen let's go and meet in the middle ages. All right.



Ben Pykare 00:42

Alright. Megan, thank you so much for sitting down with us today.



Dr. Megan J. Hall 00:45

My pleasure. Thank you for having me.



Ben Pykare 00:46

We greatly appreciate it. We get to know you a little bit as students here in the Ph. D. program at Notre Dome, but we just want to introduce you and some of your recent work to a broader audience.



Dr. Megan J. Hall 01:00

Awesome



Ben Pykare 01:01

Which we're excited about. An opening question that we'd like to start with: let's say you're at the grocery store, it's a long line, you're waiting, person behind you starts up a casual chat. And they say, "so what do you do?" How do you answer that question to a stranger?



Dr. Megan J. Hall 01:20

[Laughs] That's an excellent opening question. I think the answer is, I tend to say, "oh, I'm an academic" which nets the the blank stare.



Ben Pykare 01:32

Okay.



Dr. Megan J. Hall 01:33

And then I'll say, "which means that I work in the academic world, I do research, I do academic

administration, and I'm a history buff," or something like that. And that I think, I think people can identify more easily with those broader labels, you know.

B Ben Pykare 01:52

Yes. History buff? That, that my I can imagine spark something and people immediately they're like, "oh, I've read a book!"

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 02:01

Yes.

B Ben Pykare 02:01

"I've read seven books on this one thing." And then you're off to the races.

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 02:05

Yeah, that is really... I find that to be a good connector with people because a lot of people love history.

B Ben Pykare 02:10

Oh, yes.

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 02:11

Even if they have no idea what you would say if you say, "I'm medievalist!" You know, but if I say, "oh, I'm a... I'm a historian!" "Oh, that's so cool." And that is usually a really nice bridge into having a bigger discussion.



Will Beattie 02:23

Do you find a lot of people that you talk to have a pretty clear defined sense of the medieval in their head before you have that conversation with them?

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 02:31

You know, kind of depends. That's an interesting question. I feel like... now, my area of specialty, of course, is medieval English history. British history. So my, my sample size might be a little bit narrow. But I feel like most Brits I encounter have a stronger sense of the Middle Ages because they live among the remains of the Middle Ages every day. Whereas most

Americans I meet who are not super interested in older history, they might know a lot about the American Revolution, Colonial Era, that sort of thing. But they, they know a lot less about the Middle Ages. They would have a hard time explaining what that would be. But once I get into it, and I say, "oh, well..." I usually just give the date range. I say, "oh, it's about 500 to 1500. AD." And they'll usually say, "well, what about the Roman Empire?" "Yeah, right after the fall of the Roman Empire." So the broad strokes of history, they can start to kind of join me in understanding what the Middle Ages is. But then if I start talking about oh, manuscripts or churches or the... I think a lot of the visual cues resonate with people, and that's actually how I began my interest in the Middle Ages was those visual resonances. So I think that's, for me, a pretty natural way to start connecting with people is like, hit the hit the high notes with

B Ben Pykare 03:45

Yes.

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 03:45

And then see, like, are they? Is this clicking? Is this tracking? Are they interested? Do they want to know more? And if they do, I'll go as deep as they want to go. But if not I'll be like, "well, it was nice to talk to you." [Laughs]

B Ben Pykare 03:58

What were some of those early residences for you that got you interested in the medieval period or just medieval things?

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 04:06

Yeah. You know, it's hard to pin specifically one thing, but I will say my mom deserves a lot of the credit for introducing a love of history into my life. She was always a huge fan of history, Elizabethan England is her top favorite time period. So she was always reading novels and talking about you know, the that that part of the monarchy. And I just, I loved her passion that was really interesting to me. And I thought, "oh, this is really cool, old stuff, things in the past. Wow." And so I found myself drawn to those things through her stories and one of my earliest connections with the Middle Ages I didn't really know it at the time was through the movie "Sleeping Beauty," which I loved as a kid and I didn't know why I loved it so much. It just really all of the visual cues of the animation,. Everything just really... I thought, "wow, this is beautiful." Well, it wasn't until probably 10 years, 15 years later, I was watching a documentary on "Sleeping Beauty" and learn that the animators, the artists all went to medieval objects for their visual inspiration.

B Ben Pykare 05:13

That's really cool.



Will Beattie 05:14

Really?



Dr. Megan J. Hall 05:14

So they were looking at medieval art and architecture, to draw all the backgrounds, all the characters, costumes... So it was actually set in the Middle Ages, even though obviously, it's a very vague fairy tale time period. And so I was kind of stunned to learn that and I thought, "that makes a lot of sense now." So yes, so I think, always had a love of history, and then really gelled for me in my undergrad.



Will Beattie 05:39

And you also, when you were younger, you traveled to places like Switzerland and to the UK, . Did you find that that, kind of, encountering with the medieval firsthand in that way was also quite informative?



Dr. Megan J. Hall 05:50

Absolutely. Although I think at that time, I was not super well informed about the Middle Ages. And so, kind of like with "Sleeping Beauty," what I saw was amazing. But I didn't really know how to understand it. I didn't know what I was looking at. Like, for example, my high school prom ended up being in a medieval Guild Hall, because I was in school in Switzerland. And at the time, I just thought, "this is a really cool building." The end [laughs]. Then I thought, "medieval Guild Hall, what is that? That sounds amazing." But I just didn't really have a framework to understand it. And we... although I took an art historical, or an art history class, we didn't really... it was very broad. It was introduction art history. So it was everything from Roman Classical to Modern. So it was huge.



Ben Pykare 06:35

Very vast.



Dr. Megan J. Hall 06:35

Yes, a one semester, very fast tour. So you know, now when I go back and visit people back in Zurich, back in Switzerland, and I have a new appreciation for roaming around the Old City and [I can] be able to look at the you know, the Roman excavations and the medieval buildings. And it just, it's so much richer now. My understanding of it is so much richer. But absolutely, I think being in those environments, it really cultivates an awareness of what it's like to live with the past in the present.



Will Beattie 07:04

Yeah, absolutely.



Ben Pykare 07:06

Did you choose to go immediately from undergrad to like, "I want to do more study, this is the direction of my study"? Or was that a bit of a process as well of discerning, "oh, maybe I'm going to work here and do this and then come back to the academy." How was that journey? Was it more straightforward or more roundabout for you?



Dr. Megan J. Hall 07:28

Umm, it's been a little more roundabout, I would say. I actually went right from undergrad into my Master's degree because I was very certain at the time that I wanted to be an English teacher. And I thought, "I really like teaching at the college level." I'll do this, you know, with a Master's degree, I can teach at a community college, tech school, at any university. You know, the first couple of years worth of English Lang[uage] and Lit[erature] classes." And I really loved that. But it was in my Master's degree that I was even more exposed to medieval literature. And so I really started down that path of specialization. And when I finished the Master's degree I wasn't sure that I was ready to commit to a PhD program. So I actually ended up in a moment where I was... I kind of had a foot in both worlds. I did adjuncting as a full time job for about two years, which was so difficult. I loved being able to be in the classroom. I love being able to do the teaching. But as anybody who's been in that position knows, adjuncting is a paycheck-to-paycheck kind of existence. You know, it's just, there's no longevity, there's no benefits. It's just a very difficult lifestyle to sustain in the long term. So as much as I loved the profession, I thought, "I need something more stable." So that I ended up actually working in a law firm for three years.



Will Beattie 08:46

How do you bridge that gap and relate the Middle Ages, or find a way to relate the Middle Ages to, kind of, work which, which other people are doing? Because I think that it can be difficult sometimes for people to understand or see the benefit in, kind of, doing the sort of work we do in Medieval Studies.



Dr. Megan J. Hall 09:06

It's a great question. And, I mean, there's so many possible answers to that I... I can certainly speak about where I've ended up going with it. And I think for me, with my specific topic in women's literacy, I have been for the past... gosh, I would say, really [the] past eight, nine years now I've been really focusing on ways to bridge... and especially I think, given that this is Women's History Month, it's a really appropriate time to think about women's history generally speaking. And that is one of the places I've seen my contribution make a difference. An example that, that always comes to my mind, it was such a wonderful encounter. I had a Mellon Dissertation Fellowship, and I was at the University of London for a year. And as part of that I

got funding here from the Nanovic as a grad student to do like a big research trip. I drove all around the UK. It was amazing. It was terrifying to drive on the left side of the road. But it was [laughs] it was an adventure. And I remember I was in Cornwall and I was at this little, you know, 13th century church, that was a site I needed to go visit for my research. And I came upon a bell ringing club. And they invited me to come ring bells with them. And so I was like, "this is amazing!" So I had such a tremendous experience being taught how to ring a medieval bell with this group. And I got to talk to them too. And they asked me, you know, "why are you in Cornwall? What are you doing here?" And so I got to give them the brief rundown. And one of the older women in the group, as I was describing, like, "oh, I research the history of women's literacy and learning. And I specifically focus on 12th and 13th centuries in England. And I look at manuscript evidence, and I look at textual evidence." And I said, "you know, it's such a fascinating topic." And she was like, "could, could women read?" And I said, "absolutely!" And she's like, "I knew we could!" And it was such a wonderful... a moment that really touched my heart and made me think, "okay, what I'm doing has absolute connection to the present day." Because in helping, hopefully helping to write women's history and recover things that have been overlooked, ignored, brushed aside. So much of that has been governed by this general assumption, this bias that just sort of says, "well, women couldn't read because they were women. So it's no point in looking for evidence of that." And that is ascientific, it's ascholarly, right. I mean, none of none of that is anything that I think most of us today would ever think to do: just to grab a whole chunk of an idea and set it aside because it can't possibly be true. So there's so many scholars now who have taken this challenge and are really working to, to uncover, like, review existing evidence, come up with new evidence to show this and I, I love those moments when you know, women today can feel stronger and more empowered, because they're like, oh, this history I've received over many generations is not true.

B Ben Pykare 12:11

Yes.

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 12:11

And there's something so powerful about seeing someone in front of you be able to rewrite their own narrative, and be like, Oh, I'm not, I'm not held back by this anymore. This, this mistaken belief. So, I mean, it's such an honor to be part of a process like that. And I feel so blessed that I'm, you know, I'm working on this topic at this moment, and can actually find a way to help people in their, their current life situations. It's, it's amazing.

B Ben Pykare 12:38

And that, nicely brings us to your article, again titled "Women's Education and Literacy in England, 1066 to 1540." I have many questions, but I, we really want to kind of break down the process of how a piece like this gets made. So you have these ideas, you've read some things. What was kind of the spark that began this particular article?

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 13:08

Well thank you. I would be glad to talk about it. This article was really interesting because I

well, thank you, I would be glad to talk about it. This article was really interesting, because I was actually invited to contribute this to a special edition of History of Education Quarterly. And they approached me, I think they found my... one of my Kalamazoo conference presentations in the program. And and there are not that many people who are specifically titling their projects, like "women's literacy." So I think having that title was a very helpful directional sign of, you know, what I'm doing what I'm working on. So they, they reached out to me, and I was umm... I asked them some more questions and discovered that of the... I'm not going to be able to recall, excuse me, particularly off top my head, how many articles there ended up being in a special edition... I want to say like, six to eight, only two of them were medieval! And all the rest are Renaissance. And I think that, that spoke to me very strongly about how the medieval period is just sort of seen as this vague thing that comes before the Renaissance when... and this is something I learned, especially working on this article was I got to really learn about where education studies are. And it's so different from Medieval Studies. So education studies, as I discovered tends to be very like, "oh, the Classical era gave us our Classical authors. Then we leap forward..."

B

Ben Pykare 14:30

Then we leap to the Renaissance.

D

Dr. Megan J. Hall 14:31

... the Renaissance! Where people rediscovered Classical authors, and then oh, you have Latin-heavy education, and then you have, you know, boys finishing schools and girls finishing schools, and then it's, you know. So it's very much about educational theory, and that's how they kind of connect to present day educational theory and practice. Because it's recovering their history. And it's a very different kind of pursuit than Medieval Studies. So, I mean there's so much I could say about this, but I I guess to get to get back to your original question about how I got started, that really, that audience awareness informed everything about the article. So I was taking the paper they saw in the Kalamazoo Congress program was taken from my dissertation, it was a chapter on women's education that has now grown into this massive like, hopefully a book project at some point. Because we need to have a history of women's literacy and women's education written which there has not been one yet written. And so I started with audience and I wanted to figure out, you know, how do I talk to such a broad audience about this topic? And so it ended up being a big span, you know, about five, well, 300, 400, 500 years of time. And I needed to be able to digest specialist topics and terminology and concepts and evidence. And then present that in a fairly broad way to a big audience. So I really sat down and one of my favorite techniques: I get a giant sheet of paper, and a pack of markers. And I map out, because I'm a very visual person. So I map out what I want the content to look like.

B

Ben Pykare 16:03

Ah, wonderful.

D

Dr. Megan J. Hall 16:04

It's so helpful. It's such a great technique, and it feels very kindergarten, right? Like you're kind

of scrawling with markers, and doesn't have to be neat and organized. And so I that took me about a week, I think, to really - and I was already familiar with the topic - so like a week, to figure out how to digest this and present it to the audience. So and then from there, you know, I really had to sift through the evidence that I had and figure out which examples are the most powerful, what's going to make the most sense to a broad readership. And then, very interestingly, it was the editorial process that ended up being the most challenging because it as I discovered, they handed off the pieces to an editor who was not familiar with manuscript citation conventions, and citing medieval evidence. And that was a whole other thing. So we had to have a sort of a post-editorial conversation, all these comments kept coming back to me, like, "what's the full citation for this manuscript?" Well, I've given you the full citation for this manuscript. This is how we do it. So that ends actually ended up being a really interesting longer conversation with the managing editor of the journal, and the editor of the material. And we got it all sorted out. But all of that process just hit me once again, like, wow, this is such important work. And it's tricky work to move outside of the, like the bubble of Medieval Studies, where we all know what we're talking about, we know the conventions, we know how to present the material to our peers. But to then communicate that outside the bubble. That was challenging. I felt like I learned a lot though. It was really valuable experience.

B Ben Pykare 17:33

Yeah, even just stepping from one academic subfield to a different one, right? And the language changes....

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 17:40

Yes.

B Ben Pykare 17:40

So, so drastically.

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 17:42

Yeah, absolutely.

B Ben Pykare 17:44

When you when you talk about evidence, what what were the main places you were, you know, physically or online, where you had been slowly... I'm assuming you came to this with a certain amount of evidence you already had, and maybe found some more along the way. So yeah, just tell us more about when you're, you know, kind of doing history, the work of history. What were kind of the main evidence pieces that you incorporated in this article?

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 18:11

Dr. Megan J. Hall 20:11

Yeah, absolutely. So I, when I began this project, it was my dissertation. So focusing specifically on the Ancrene Wisse texts. And for anyone who's listening and doesn't know much about this text, it was written in the early 13th century, in the West Midlands of England, like right along the border with Wales. And it was written mostly in English, in Middle English. There are other languages mixed in, there's lots of Latin quotations, there's also... England was a very multilingual nation, if "nation" is even the right word at that point. And so there's lots of linguistic influences in this, in this book. But what's most interesting to me is that it was written for women. And it wasn't just written in English, there's lots of Latin that's untranslated, there's a lot of visual cues in the manuscripts. For example, things are not underlined, they're not written in red, it's all presented as one black ink writing. So it's just line after line of black ink. And for anyone who's not familiar with how manuscripts are presented, that's a sign of someone who's reading the text as a scholar, reading the text for information as opposed to, you know, often you'll see decorated initials that start, sort of chapters or start sections, or you'll see index words, you'll see red underline things for the start of passages, you'll see different languages written in different scripts. And that can be a visual cue to the reader, like, "oh, this is a script meant for someone else to read," like, like a, like a parish priest who's counseling you, for example. So in this book, it's all presented visually in a very uniform way. And the book is small, it's well worn. It's not made out of particularly valuable material. So that's the kind of evidence I draw on as I look at the object itself. How was it created, what kinds of materials were used? How was the text put in it? And then I tried to figure out how would readers have used this text. And so because this is a text written for women, because women would have used it in an anchor hold, which for anchoresses, they would typically in this time period, this 12/13 century era, they typically would have come mainly from the aristocracy, but also from other classes with evidence of that. And they would have lived in these anchor holds, which are one or two room cells, often built on the sides of churches, or castles, or in churchyards. And so it would have been a very solitary life. And one of the instructions in this text - which is a guidebook for how to live this anchoritic life - one of the instructions is to do reading and to do writing and to do all sorts of intellectual practices that I think many people don't imagine women participating in in the 13th century. And so that's, that's a main source of evidence and one of the really original sets of work that I, analyses that I do. And then I joined that together with a lot of other tremendous work scholars have done to find other examples and other texts and manuscripts and objects. And so that evidence helps to put my evidence into context, since I spent about a year noting all the marginal annotations, and all the ways that the book was put together, and the materials that were used. So all of that was brand new work. And it was such a tremendous privilege to be able to get that fellowship and do that work.



Will Beattie 21:24

I was going to ask there... that you said this, this text is, well, this book is small, not particularly expensively made. I was going to ask, then, does that suggest it's portable, that it's something that traveling around with? But then you say that this is actually for an anchoress, so they're not traveling far at all. In fact, no further than the two rooms of their little cell, basically. So what can the fact that so small and, kind, of crudely made if we can use that [term], what does that tell us then?



Dr. Megan J. Hall 21:52

Yeah, absolutely. So I, when I began this project, it was my dissertation. So focusing specifically on the Ancrene Wisse texts. And for anyone who's listening and doesn't know much about this text, it was written in the early 13th century, in the West Midlands of England, like right along the border with Wales. And it was written mostly in English, in Middle English. There are other languages mixed in, there's lots of Latin quotations, there's also... England was a very multilingual nation, if "nation" is even the right word at that point. And so there's lots of linguistic influences in this, in this book. But what's most interesting to me is that it was written for women. And it wasn't just written in English, there's lots of Latin that's untranslated, there's a lot of visual cues in the manuscripts. For example, things are not underlined, they're not written in red, it's all presented as one black ink writing. So it's just line after line of black ink. And for anyone who's not familiar with how manuscripts are presented, that's a sign of someone who's reading the text as a scholar, reading the text for information as opposed to, you know, often you'll see decorated initials that start, sort of chapters or start sections, or you'll see index words, you'll see red underline things for the start of passages, you'll see different languages written in different scripts. And that can be a visual cue to the reader, like, "oh, this is a script meant for someone else to read," like, like a, like a parish priest who's counseling you, for example. So in this book, it's all presented visually in a very uniform way. And the book is small, it's well worn. It's not made out of particularly valuable material. So that's the kind of evidence I draw on as I look at the object itself. How was it created, what kinds of materials were used? How was the text put in it? And then I tried to figure out how would readers have used this text. And so because this is a text written for women, because women would have used it in an anchor hold, which for anchoresses, they would typically in this time period, this 12/13 century era, they typically would have come mainly from the aristocracy, but also from other classes with evidence of that. And they would have lived in these anchor holds, which are one or two room cells, often built on the sides of churches, or castles, or in churchyards. And so it would have been a very solitary life. And one of the instructions in this text - which is a guidebook for how to live this anchoritic life - one of the instructions is to do reading and to do writing and to do all sorts of intellectual practices that I think many people don't imagine women participating in in the 13th century. And so that's, that's a main source of evidence and one of the really original sets of work that I, analyses that I do. And then I joined that together with a lot of other tremendous work scholars have done to find other examples and other texts and manuscripts and objects. And so that evidence helps to put my evidence into context, since I spent about a year noting all the marginal annotations, and all the ways that the book was put together, and the materials that were used. So all of that was brand new work. And it was such a tremendous privilege to be able to get that fellowship and do that work.

Yeah, absolutely. Well, I will offer clarification, I wouldn't say it's clearly made, I would just say it's more I call it a working book. That's the terminology I use.

B

Ben Pykare 22:00

That's good. That's fun.

D

Dr. Megan J. Hall 22:01

Yeah, I thought so. I thought it really captured that spirit of like, this book is for utilitarian purposes.

B

Ben Pykare 22:08

It's for reading.


D

Dr. Megan J. Hall 22:08

It's for reading! Exactly. But that's a really great question you're asking about: what is the size tell us about the function of the book? And so also, one, one misconception that, that I had about anchoresses, and a lot a lot of people do as well, is that they, they never left their cells. Their... in theory, they never left their cells. But they actually could get permission to leave. They could go on pilgrimage, some had gardens that they tended. So there was actually surprising amount of mobility. [Laughs], there was a surprising amount of mobility in these women's lives and, and the fact that there are, there's so much in this, this Ancrene Wisse book, this guidebook, recommending conduct for women when they're at their windows. So how anchoresses interact with people come to their windows. It's very clear that there's this ideal prescribed way of living, and then there's the reality. And so the author helps to try to bridge that gap with, with the real life of an anchoress. You've got people coming to your window for advice, that sort of thing. So I tend to think that with the smallness of this book, A. it's a lot easier to get animal skin that size. So you can use a lot of you know, there's it's much more readily available than, say, making a giant luxury book where one cow gives you one leaf that you fold in half. And that's, what, four pages of text. So it's easier to procure materials and materials are less expensive. And it's also small enough that it could be passed in and out of a window. And there's evidence in the text that I talk about, where it seems very much that these anchoresses participated in a reading community, and that they might have been writing out and copying these texts for themselves. So whoever their, their maidservant or a priest or confessor, or spiritual advisor, could have helped to circulate these materials like the actual, the individual gatherings, maybe that could have been copied a section at a time and passed through the window and then passed back out again. So "portability" is actually I think, the right word to use for this, but maybe not portable in the sense of we think of like a friar going out to preach in the community and carrying a small Bible with him, or carrying a guidance text with him, but portable for different reasons. So that there could be the circulation among this reader community.

 Ben Pykare 22:39


Yard time.

 Dr. Megan J. Hall 23:11

I mean, this is a great example of how looking at these texts, the physical nature of them as objects can really actually open a window into the kind of life of the period in some really interesting ways. Absolutely.

 Ben Pykare 24:41

So the other, maybe starting question was the timeframe. Were you prescribed that from the journal? Or did you get to kind of map out like, "I don't know if I'm comfortable going to the 9th, 8th centuries, let's keep it a little bit... with a little bit more sources." And then, did you decide 1540 is a natural ending with the, like, coinciding kind of the dissolution of monasteries? Or was that kind of like a prescribed, "okay, the next person's pick it up in 1540, Megan, so you gotta get us that far"?


 Dr. Megan J. Hall 25:16

It's a great question. No, I had a lot of independence on this one. And I think it was helpful that the medieval period was maybe an era that the editors and the contributors didn't necessarily go into a lot. So they really wanted to... I'm glad they wanted to really rely on specialists to help bring them the information that, you know, could be helpfully included in this special edition on, like, the history of the history of education or historical education, or however you want to put it. So no, I basically, as I was talking with the editors, you know, they approached and said, "hey, we've got, we want, we're getting two contributors, can you can you do something for us along the lines of this topic that you wrote on for Kalamazoo"? I said, "absolutely." And I said, "how about if I, you know... this is what I specialize in. So let me focus on this second half of the Middle Ages," basically. And so they said, "that was wonderful." And I, you're exactly right, that I picked, basically [from] post-Conquest to the dissolution of the monasteries to talk about this, because those are such impactful events in British history.



Will Beattie 26:19

The dissolution, of course, being when Henry VIII went around and basically closed down all the monasteries. And we lost, sadly, lost a lot of manuscripts during that, and a lot of them went into private hands.

 Dr. Megan J. Hall 26:30

Absolutely, yes. And, you know, because the Church had been such a bastion of education for so long, you know, it really shook up the the educational systems. And at that point, it sort of, I think, kind of propelled them into the track that we now know is sort of the more modern angle

of, of school houses and you know, formalized curricula, which is very much obviously where we are today, but you know, that had its roots in late medieval and early modern... well, really Europe overall, but since my areas, England, for sure, in England.

B Ben Pykare 27:05

With this, this project in mind, you talked about women's education occurring at home with a tutor sometimes, in nunneries, in the various places, and then also to further complicate it, among various social classes. So it's kind of these like geographical as well as, like, social setting. And kind of as you're examining all these different imaginary people, right, these archetypes of okay, a working person learning at home... Was there any group that you learned the most about? Or were most interested in? Or were surprised by as you were researching all these different people in different places, learning?

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 27:50

Yeah, absolutely. And in fact, that was one of the coolest parts of this particular article is that I really got to look at all the social strata, and all the situations in which education could occur. And I think it might be helpful to clarify here as well, that, as I mentioned a minute ago, education in the Middle Ages didn't really mean a formal curriculum.

B Ben Pykare 28:09

Oh, yes.

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 28:10

At the university, yes. And, and within Church structures, if people were headed to a clerical profession, yes, that had already gelled quite nicely. But for for most people, anyone who wasn't University-bound, who wasn't training to be a cleric, education was much broader. And so for the aristocratic classes, it was how to be a, you know, a lady, a gentleman, how... you know, all of the social training as well as literacy training, decorum, manners, you know, writing, archery, all the pursuits you'd be expected to carry in your, carry out in your adulthood, you're getting the formation for that, as a child. If you are part of the rising working class, then you might need to keep business records, you might need to be able to, you know, [do] like accounting, or bookkeeping, that, you know, that sort of thing. And then when you're in, working in the field, like literally doesn't really have much of a place for you. So and that's, that's a broad generalization. But I think, you know, in the Middle Ages it's still fairly true. So education is broad. And it really, yeah, it depended on you know, which which socioeconomic situation you were in. So, because of all of that we have the most records for the aristocracy, we have more records for aristocratic girls and women. So I was really excited to be able to expand and that's actually the audience that the Ancrene Wisse was written for, initially was this aristocratic class. So there's more evidence for that. And I've spent a lot of time with that body of material. But I was really interested to get more into social history and learn more about the the rising middle class and the groups below them. So I think probably one of the most fascinating areas I ended up learning more about was the many different kinds of

professions that women could undertake in the working class. This and all the different kinds of apprenticeships that girls could undertake and, and different laws about education. And so to see these, these sorts of things coalescing, you know, in the, in the 14th century, if I'm, if I'm recalling the century correctly, there's a law that makes its way under the books, basically, that protects the right of, of, you know, I'm not even sure the best term to use for this, people would say, you know, "peasants" in past... or maybe I would just say the the "agrarian" class, sort of working class. Peasant is not a helpful term anymore. That group of people, this protected their right to seek an education. And that was a fascinating development for me, and I'm, you know, it gets me wondering what kinds of education they end up getting, you know. Could could they be spared from the field? Were parents wanting a better life life for their children? Did education represent this for them in the way that it does today? And so, you know, all of this is tied into the changing social structures of England following the [Black Death] plague and, you know, working conditions that were rapidly changing with a shortage of workers. And so it's, it's a fascinating angle of social history that I really got to get into, in researching this.

B

Ben Pykare 31:13

Fantastic.



Will Beattie 31:15

Another kind of crucial parts of the research we do can tend to be in libraries and archives and places like this. Did you have any particular experience with using those kinds of resources for this, this research? What were they like?

D

Dr. Megan J. Hall 31:28

Yeah, that's one of my favorite parts of this work is to get into the archives. And to me it, it goes back to that childhood love of all things medieval, and historical, and the sort of the romantic part of being a medievalist, right? It was such a tremendous experience to be able to connect with vicars and, you know, different parish priests, and just all sorts of folks out there at Salisbury Cathedral, and be able to say, "hey, I need to get into your archive to look at this manuscript. Is that okay? Can we set the set this time up"? Everyone was so welcoming, and I got to have just tremendous experiences, like being led into the secret parts of Salisbury Cathedral and being led up these medieval stone staircases into the, the manuscript Library up there that, you know, most people don't ever get to see this stuff. So it was such a kind of a childhood dream come true to be able to be climbing these stone staircases, and sitting down, this medieval librarian was the only one there and I was appointed a local volunteer as my chaperone. And she was so kind, and it was freezing cold, you know, the stone is 16" thick, and the sunlight never penetrates it. So the atmospheric experience alone was tremendous. But you know, really being able to sit down with these 800-1,000 year old manuscripts... ..and to know that you're one of the few people out there who can, who can work with this object, and that you've been so privileged to get, you know, to have the mentorship and the training and the education and the support to get to that point. And then to be able to make some sense out of it. You know, it's both personally fulfilling and professionally fulfilling, which is fantastic. So, and, you know, there's so many of these places that are the the smaller collections of smaller libraries. And then you've got something like the British Library, which is massive, and their

staff is tremendously helpful. And they have these amazing reading rooms. So I got to spend a whole year there during my fellowship, going just about every day, and sitting down with the Ancrenne Wisse Nero manuscript, which is the earliest surviving textual version. And just sitting there every day paging through it, it started to feel like an old friend [laughs]. So there's that emotional experience too. So I feel like archival work, you know, you have to have all sorts of training to do it. And then when you get there, it feels so special. At least that's how it feels to me and to be able to, you know, be one of the few people in the world who can work on this. And then to see other colleagues there who are part of that group too. And you're like, "hey, everybody, can we talk about this"? And having tea, you know, on break times, and just talking about manuscripts. I think archival work is such a special way to carry out professional work.



Will Beattie 32:47

Yeah. You say that... and I completely agree that you're sort of in a privileged position where you have these skills to be able to look at these manuscripts, but there might be people out there who just wondering, "well, isn't that just looking at a text? I mean, what kind of skills can you surely need"? So what skills are you talking about?



Dr. Megan J. Hall 34:25

Sure. Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think, well, sort of an aside the fact that so many manuscripts are being digitized, I think means that anybody who's curious can look and think about and can get something out of it for sure. But as most people have or will discover when they look at this page: how do you know what's written on it? You know, and so, the, the different kinds of scripts, the different languages... and then as I have talked about already, the different kinds of ways that those texts are presented different colors, different scripts. So there's all sorts of different kinds of, we call it "hands" if it's the individual scribe, their sort of handwriting. But then the "script" is sort of like the font that they that they're using. So, you know, we have different scripts, and you have to know what purpose those scripts are serving. And you have to know how book is put together. And there's so much that's not obvious from looking at a book. In fact, I recently did a workshop at a local high school here, and we made a little booklet. And it's something I've done before and I have so much fun doing it, it was how I really, when I was working on book arts, you know, 20, 25 years ago, one of the ways I got into manuscript studies and try and understood it was by making my own book and knowing how it's put together. That information, it might seem kind of trivial, but it actually there's a ton of information that we can get for how these different groups of pages were sewn together down the middle, why the binder made that choice, why the artist or the scribe made the choice. There's so many different people who would have been involved in producing a book. And what we see in front of us is not usually how it was originally constructed. And so to have that specialist knowledge to interpret, and even to know what to look for, things like the size of the pages, the quality of the animal skin, any repairs that were made, how to date those repairs, what kind of thread was used, what kind of binding material was used, whether it was left loose or sewn together with when a cover was added. Was this produced in a well-known workshop? Who did the the illuminations? There's so many things that anyone can learn these if they want to. They're not walled off. And if you're if you're interested in this, there are plenty of intro books that you'll just, you'll really enjoy reading. And then you can go and look at digitized manuscripts and really get this experience for yourself pretty quickly. But the more you can learn, and the more you can be trained by people who know as well, which I was, you know, I've been so privileged

to be able to train with some of the great, you know, codicologists, the people who study the history of the book, and palaeographers, these people who study ancient handwriting. It... you know, the more you learn, the more you realize you need to know. And so it's, it's both fun and a challenge.

B Ben Pykare 34:39

And so much of what you mentioned was seeing things that were not there, right? Seeing what colors were not used, seeing how plain in many ways... you know, and that, that would not jump out to me as it telling you a lot. But with with with that training, then you can immediately see, "oh, they didn't use all these things, which must mean that it was used for this." Right? And so seeing things that aren't there with that specialist knowledge, I feel like is a very helpful skill, right? To just start the ball rolling for them like imagining, okay, "what's the world in which this object existed and was used in"? Thank you so much, Megan for sharing all that.

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 37:13

Absolutely.

B Ben Pykare 37:14

Well, unfortunately, that's all the time we have for today. Dr. Hall, it's been a pleasure chatting with you. How can our listeners find out more about you or your work?

D Dr. Megan J. Hall 38:06

So there are a couple of ways to reach me. You can get me on Twitter. I'm @MeghanJHallPhD. I have a website called AnchorholdOnDemand, which is just a WordPress website. So it should probably be "anchorholdondemand.wordpress.com." I am currently working on building more of my academic web presence. But I can also just be reached on the Medieval Institute website. So if you just go to "medieval.nd.edu." And then you can navigate to our "People" section and you'll find me there and my contact info is there. And I am always happy for people to reach out. I want to be included in people's mentor networks, if you would like to get more information to talk to me. I have been helped by so many people along the way. And I would love to give back. And especially given my areas of research, women who are interested in... and girls, young women who are really interested in learning more about how to further their own professions. I am just so happy to help.

B Ben Pykare 39:09

Fantastic.



Will Beattie 39:10

Thank you so much, Dr. Hall for coming with us today. And thank you all for listening in and we hope you will meet with us next time in the Middle Ages. Missing In the Middle Ages is sponsored by the Medieval Institute of the University of Notre Dame, with a generous grant from the Medieval Academy of America. If you have any questions for medievalist send them to us at "meetingthema@gmail.com." You can follow us on Twitter @meetingintheMA and Instagram @meetinginthemiddleages. For more information on some of the topics raised in this episode, head on over to the episode description. Thanks for listening