THE RENAISSANCE HOUSEHOLD AS CENTRE OF LEARNING

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Centres of learning may be formal or informal, either institutions dedicated to the systematic inculcation of learning, or locations in which learning more or less haphazardly takes place. The following discussion focuses on one sort of informal centre, the late-medieval and Renaissance household, the importance of which as a location of learning has perhaps not received due attention. In a very general sense, of course, the role of the household as centre of learning is a universal one, since there is no-one, probably, who does not begin his education within the family circle. Moreover, it has always been common for professional skills to be handed down from one generation to another within the family. To what extent, then, is it possible to problematise a particular aspect of this huge subject? One might suggest that there is a particular relationship between the new humanistic learning associated with the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance and the household circumstances in which this new learning was prosecuted. Examples will be drawn principally from the situation in the British Isles in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but it is likely that the following observations will apply also to other countries.

Throughout this period the most important centres of learning continued to be those connected with the church: the parish and grammar schools, the musical and choir schools, the colleges and the universities. Alongside these were centres of professional and administrative activity (increasingly staffed by laymen), where literary interests might be stimulated. One might think here of the English Privy Seal Office, in which the poet Thomas Hoccleve, admirer of Chaucer, worked; a Scottish example would be the College of Justice, established by King James V in 1532. The household, by way of contrast with these examples, was an institution neither explicitly ecclesiastical nor professional, nor was it necessarily organised on the basis of rules or statutes (albeit that the royal household had evolved a definite structure of offices). The household,
rather, acquired its dynamism from a combination of ancient custom and prevailing social norms. As an instrument of social cohesion the family household distinguished itself by the way it privileged relations between the sexes, and we shall see that the female members of the family were of no small importance for the learning which was carried on within the household.

The smallest form of household was that of the family. By this we should not think of the small, nuclear family of today, but rather of the extended families common in countries around the Mediterranean and parts further south. This larger unit is known to social historians as the ‘stem family’, and it is characteristically made up of members drawn from three or more generations, all under one paterfamilias. An idea of this kind of arrangement, as it happens, is given by Sir Thomas More, in his *Utopia* (1515-1516):

Each city, then, consists of households, the households consisting generally of blood-relations. When the women grow up and are married, they move into their husbands’ households. On the other hand, male children and after them grand-children remain in the family, and are subject to the oldest parent, unless his mind has started to fail, in which case the next oldest takes his place. To keep the city from becoming too large or too small, they have decreed that there shall be no more than six thousand households in it (exclusive of the surrounding countryside), each family containing between ten and sixteen adults. They do not, of course, try to regulate the number of minor children in a family.

At the other end of the social scale one might mention the household of the king, which was altogether more elaborate.

For his part, the minor sixteenth-century poet, George Cavendish, has provided a fascinating and detailed description of the household of a really grand person—namely, his patron, Thomas Wolsey, when the latter was at the height of his power, as Chancellor of England, Archbishop of York, and Cardinal, in 1530. There were three principal officers: a steward (always a doctor or a priest); a treasurer (a knight); and a controller (an esquire). In addition there were: a cofferer, three marshalls, two yeomen ushers; two grooms; and an almoner. In the hall kitchen there were: two clerks of the kitchen; one clerk controller; a surveyor of the dresser; one clerk of

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