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“Model Mamas”: The Domestic Partnership of Home Economics Pioneers Flora Rose and Martha Van Rensselaer

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IN 1925, AT AN EVENT honoring Martha Van Rensselaer, cochair of the Department of Home Economics at Cornell University, an alumna of the department commented to the assembled crowd that “she it is, with the partner she came to love and who came to love her, who has imparted to every girl who has had the great privilege of spending four years with them, an ideal of womanhood in service to mankind.”¹ The partner Van Rensselaer came to love, her cochair of the department, was Flora Rose. Together the two women created the department at Cornell and stewarded its transition into an independent college of the university (also in 1925), simultaneously serving as pioneers and leaders in the home economics movement. The love between the two, as all who knew them acknowledged, went far beyond the collegial. The two women lived together from around 1908 until Van Rensselaer’s death in 1932 and were so inseparable that they were often referred to collectively as Miss Van Rose.

Their relationship was treated by friends as both a model for and representative of other same-sex relationships within the home economics movement. Their partnership merits attention because of the complex truth noted in the celebration for Van Rensselaer above, that home economists defined and propagated “an ideal of womanhood in service to mankind.” This service might be narrowly defined, in that female students in home economics departments were educated to provide ideal homes to the men they married, but it might also be understood more broadly, even heroically in the movement’s own terms, in that the proper management of domestic matters both within and outside the home could bring about a more perfect society.

¹Statement of Mrs. Banner, class of 1915, box 11, folder 41, New York State College of Home Economics Papers, Carl Kroch Library, Cornell University (hereafter NYSCHÉ Papers).

Emerging at the end of the nineteenth century, the home economics movement sought to rationalize housework and to create new opportunities for women to work outside the home, largely in fields related to domesticity such as dietetics, interior design, and institutional management. By effecting changes both inside and outside the home, leaders of this movement attempted to change the social status of housework, raising it to the level of a profession. Early in the movement there were some who saw its potential as a means for training servants, but this group was quickly eclipsed by a larger number of people, mostly women, who saw the field as a way to improve society rather than simply to solve the “servant problem.” The majority of professional home economists envisioned a home in which the woman of the house did most or all of the work, aided not just by new technologies but also by a new theorization of housework in which domestic labor could be interesting and fulfilling.²

While the early leaders of the home economics movement built academic departments and developed a disciplinary field, they simultaneously created a community of like-minded activists. This community had a strong character of its own that stood in a complex and important relationship to the field and the ideals of the movement. While researching the history of the movement’s first generation, I was struck by how many close female relationships emerged from archival materials and how many of the women involved in the home economics movement shared homes. Although significant figures in the movement such as Ellen Richards, a chemist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the acknowledged mother of the movement, and Agnes Fay Morgan, of the University of California at Berkeley, did marry, far more of the women lived with other women in arrangements that seemed to go beyond the economically convenient.³ Indeed, each time I ventured into a new archive, another of these relationships emerged. The partnerships revealed themselves in many sources, including professional correspondence between colleagues, obituaries, personal correspondence, and public statements at

²Academic home economists of the first generation imagined their audience as primarily made up of middle-class women who would have only the minimum of hired domestic help if they had any at all. Indeed, the movement hoped to make women entirely self-sufficient in the home so that they would not need to hire help. Some tasks such as laundry might be sent out to local businesses to make this possible. Because many of the first generation taught at land-grant institutions, they were often involved with agricultural extension services, whose audience was mostly rural. The farmwife, who was the target of so many home economics bulletins, was unlikely to have had a servant. For discussions of the history of hired domestic help in America see Thomas Dublin, *Transforming Women’s Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); and Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

³Home economics same-sex domestic partnerships include Flora Rose and Martha Van Rensselaer; Flora Rose and Claribel Nye after Van Rensselaer’s death; Helen Canon and Beulah Blackmore; Sarah Louise Arnold and Dr. Mary Hood; Louise Stanley, Annabel Mathews, and Mabel Walker Willebrandt; and Helen T. Parsons and May Cowles of the University of Wisconsin.

ceremonial events. I was struck by the openness with which writers referred to these relationships. Beyond their candor, what I read convinced me not only that writers were fond of the specific women to whom or about whom they were writing but also that they seemed to have a soft spot for female partnership in general.

Although it was not at all unusual for educated middle-class women to live in domestic partnerships during the first half of the twentieth century, it seemed worthwhile to examine how these relationships were perceived within the movement and what connection they might have to the development of home economics itself. Because home economists were engaged in work that was supposed in large part to prepare women for married life, the fact that many of the women who were involved in this movement lived in same-sex relationships interested me. Among historians of the movement, relationships such as Rose and Van Rensselaer's have been acknowledged, but no one as yet has considered what relationship these partnerships might have had to the content of the field itself. The relationship between Flora Rose and Martha Van Rensselaer, the cofounders and directors of home economics at Cornell University, is especially significant because these two women not only were very important figures within the movement but also seem to have served as models in their personal life to other home economists.

HOME SWEET IVORY TOWER

Rose and Van Rensselaer and other home economists of the first generation constantly blurred boundaries between the domestic and professional as traditionally conceived. Although the university environment emerged in the middle ages from monastic study, by the end of the nineteenth century what is loosely referred to as the German model had come to dominate. This model, while less cloistered, retained a social boundary between the inside and outside of academia. The university came to be seen metonymically as the laboratory. This was a space for pure research unadulterated by the anomalies of ordinary life. Home economists, who were among the first women to get tenured positions in major universities, seemed to function at odds with this model. At the same time that they lobbied fiercely to be perceived as scientific researchers, they presented a new understanding of what the laboratory itself was. Home economists developed kitchen labs, for instance, in which the traditionally nonrational world of home life overlapped the world of the "hard" sciences. They also consistently refused to behave as if the academy was one thing and home life another, holding important departmental meetings in private homes and treating students as sisters or friends, frolicking with them at social events such as taffy pulls and pajama parties.⁴

⁴For example, Mrs. Erway, a teacher of clothing design at Cornell, assigned a class in 1931 to make pajamas and then held a pajama party at her house at which there was music,

Because home economists of the first generation advocated a rearrangement of domestic life in terms not only of practices but also of perceptions, the fact that they blended their private lives so freely with their academic lives should make us pay close attention to the lives that were on display. As they modeled a new way of thinking about home life *and* academia, many home economists also presented their students with an alternative to heterosexual married life. That they were not gay rights activists is perfectly clear, but it is also clear that they did not regard the lives they lived in partnership with other women as inferior to marriages between men and women. As the work of many scholars has made us aware, we cannot use the word “lesbian” to define people who did not have cultural access to this word themselves. Yet we should keep our minds open to the possibility that these relationships were sexual. To do so is at the least to recognize the variety of human experience. What matters most here, though, is not whether these partners had sex with each other but how their partnerships reflected on the work to which they dedicated their lives. Indeed, home economists of this first generation created an ideal of home life derived from their same-sex experiences that was based on the expectation of a partnership that was truly equal, not, as with the traditional model for married men and women, based on inequality and separate spheres.

Martha Van Rensselaer came to Cornell University when she was thirty-six years old. She had grown up in the New York town of Randolph, the daughter of a father who was a doctor and a mother who was apparently the center of intellectual life in town, entertaining the town’s professionals in regular meetings where she talked about the issues of the day. Martha first worked as a schoolteacher and then as commissioner of schools for Cataaugus County. Reportedly, she was asked to promise that she would not marry when she took this job. She refused, although in her own recollection of the event she noted that there had been no suitors on hand, and she got the appointment anyway. That she told this story about herself indicates that she had already developed a feminist sense of justice. In 1900 she was invited to come to Cornell and create a series of extension bulletins for farmers’ wives dealing with household issues, and she remained there for the remainder of her professional life. She was a solidly built woman with a round face and thick hair. Although her immediate relatives were

dancing, and no mention of a Mr. Erway. Other faculty members were invited, and Erway wore Chinese pajamas. The same year Marion Pfund, also of Cornell, invited her students over every Wednesday for dinner and candy making. In Illinois the Household Science Club, a student group founded at the instigation of Isabel Bevier, head of the department, held regular meetings to which they invited faculty for discussion and food. In November 1903 the club enjoyed a demonstration and subsequent sampling of fudge, peanut brittle, and fondant. “Domecon Doings,” *Cornell Countryman* (February 1931) and (September 1931), box 21, folder 9, NYCHE; and box 5, University of Illinois College of Home Economics Papers (hereafter UI Papers).

not wealthy, she was a member of one of the oldest and most renowned Dutch families in New York. In public life she wore simple but fashionable clothing made of good fabrics with few embellishments. She sometimes dressed in unconventional ways, according to the standards of her day: in photographs from a camping trip she made with her partner she can be seen wearing canvas trousers.

Flora Rose, ten years younger than Van Rensselaer and as dainty as her partner was stately, was from a wealthy Denver family. She had received a bachelor of science degree from Kansas State University and in 1907 earned her master of arts in food and nutrition, a new field, from Columbia University. She then wrote to the administrators at Cornell University to encourage them to open a home economics department and suggested her own willingness to be part of the project. In that same year Rose arrived at Cornell to take up the new position of lecturer in nutrition with the understanding that she and Van Rensselaer together would develop a college course in home economics. When Van Rensselaer had first moved to Ithaca, she shared a house with her brother, but the pair of women soon established themselves in a home together and continued to live and work together until Van Rensselaer's death in 1932. The couple also owned a vacation home on a lake in the Adirondacks to which they invited friends and colleagues during the summer.

Close as this companionship was, Van Rensselaer was not Rose's only female partner. After Rose retired from her position as dean of home economics at Cornell and some ten years after Van Rensselaer's death she established a new household with the home economist Claribel Nye. Nye had been an early student of Rose and her partner. She graduated from Cornell in 1914 and had gone on to a successful career in home economics extension work in the West. When Rose retired she went to live with Nye in California in a house in the Berkeley hills. She brought along an armchair that had been her first gift to Van Rensselaer, connecting her past and present partnerships with a domestic object. The two women were committed to each other, and when Rose died Nye wrote to a friend at Cornell that "she belonged to the College and the Alumnae and many others in whom she had been so interested and to whom she was devoted, but I was so close to her these past 19 years that I'll admit being devastated and forlorn these past weeks. I hoped so much that we might have another year together."⁵ When Nye herself died in 1970 friends suggested that any memorial donations of money be made to the Flora Rose Fund, a scholarship at Cornell. Rose's own will had included a large bequest to the Martha Van Rensselaer

⁵The armchair is mentioned in a note that Nye sent to the staff of the College of Home Economics at Cornell thanking them for their condolence notes. Necrology, NYSCHÉ Papers. Claribel Nye to Helen Canoyer, August 31, 1959, box 6, folder 16, NYSCHÉ Papers. Canoyer was dean of the College of Home Economics from 1953 to 1969.

Alumnae Scholarship Fund. In death as in life Van Rensselaer and Rose's personal partnerships were intertwined with their professional work.

That women in the home economics movement tended to share their personal lives with other professional women was not unusual. Boston marriages, or domestic partnerships between two single women of the middle and upper middle class, were common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Robin Muncy writes, close female partnerships, whether domestic or not, were a central feature of what she terms a "female dominion" in public reform work. Home economics was one movement among several in the period between the Civil War and the Great Depression that saw women-identified women working together to reform society in ways that were often directed at protecting other women—workers, mothers, consumers—from the ravages of the industrializing world.⁶ "Boston marriage" was the name given to these arrangements when they were domestic precisely because such partnerships grew out of the friendships formed at the many women's colleges in the Boston area. At the women's colleges students met others who were, like themselves, not entirely content to move from the role of daughter to the role of wife and mother without exploring a little of the world beyond the domestic. Same-sex relationships were common among women as they began to establish themselves in colleges and universities and often included deep emotional connections. Many female students developed crushes upon each other and engaged in elaborate courtships. John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman quote a description of such rituals: "When a Vassar girl takes a shine to another, she straightaway enters upon a regular course of bouquet sendings, interspersed with tinted notes, mysterious packages of . . . candies, locks of hair perhaps, . . . until at last the object of her attentions is captured, [and] the two become inseparable." Whether or not such partnerships included a sexual element, they existed within a network of professional women with sustained emotional ties to each other.⁷

The pathologization of homosexuality that emerged with the popularization of psychology in the 1920s largely did not affect women of Rose and Van Rensselaer's generation. Although Marion Talbot of the University of Chicago came under attack for her close relationship with social work pioneer Sophonisba Breckenridge, most of the evidence from the archives shows not only acceptance for the same-sex partnerships in the world of home economics but also celebration of them.⁸ Why this should have been

⁶Robin Muncy, *Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890–1935* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Muncy focuses on the ways in which women involved in the Settlement House and Social Work movements created professional opportunities within reform movements of the progressive era and 1920s.

⁷John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 126.

⁸I am indebted to an anonymous reader for the *Journal of the History of Sexuality* for this information. For an interesting discussion of Breckenridge and Talbot's relationship in the context of the reform movement see Mary Jo Deegan, "'Dear Love, Dear Love': Feminist

so is difficult to say. Perhaps the age of the women concerned protected them. As popular culture became sexualized in the 1920s and there were increasing opportunities for heterosexual activities, it was increasingly obvious who was opting out of mingling with the opposite sex. By this time, however, the pioneers of home economists were mostly in their fifties and sixties, ages at which women traditionally have been perceived as no longer sexual. Just as the common sense of the nineteenth century could not see female partnerships as sexual because they were *female* and women were understood to be asexual, the common sense of the early twentieth century was probably unable to imagine “elderly” women as sexual.

The college environment provided many opportunities for same-sex bonding. As Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz notes in her study of women’s colleges, “By their mature years, many of the women professors within the women’s colleges had committed themselves to other women. They had made choices, and in the process had formed deep and meaningful attachments to other women which opened up realms of self-knowledge, emotional growth, and a shared life.”⁹ Such bonds continued to form in coeducational colleges even where the presence of male students and male faculty offered opportunities for heterosexual alliances. Single-sex dormitories continued to provide female (and male) students with a homosocial domestic life. In addition, the sense of isolation that many women on the faculty at colleges may have felt as they found themselves in a minority on campuses probably made the companionship of other academic women particularly welcome. Female faculty on coeducational campuses still often form women’s faculty groups to discuss women’s issues on campus as well as to offer each other support, and that support could only have been more needed and more appreciated a century ago.

For female professors colleges and universities at the turn of the century could be lonely places in which few colleagues shared one’s experience as an academic pioneer. The lady professor was often considered out of place and even a traitor to her gender and to nature itself. For such a woman the companionship of other professional and professorial women was probably profoundly comforting. For women in home economics the experience of difference in a male world was both exaggerated and eased because they established an entirely female world within the university. Home economics professors were often considered bizarre intruders in the first years of the movement, as male faculty in the sciences and liberal arts struggled to deal with the idea of kitchen laboratories. But within home economics departments women were judged the most important people in society because

Pragmatism and the Chicago Female World of Love and Ritual,” *Gender and Society* 10, no. 5 (October 1996): 590–607.

⁹Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women’s Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 190.

they maintained the home that home economists considered the basis for all civilization.

While the women whom Lefkowitz Horowitz discusses may have crossed disciplinary boundaries in their personal relationships, Flora Rose and Martha Van Rensselaer found partners within their field. That they did so is significant. It might be argued that two female English professors could live together without their domestic arrangements having any impact at all on the teaching of literature. But when two women dedicated to making home life rational, modern, and fulfilling chose to live together they made a statement, however unwitting, that the domestic ideal did not necessarily include heterosexual relationships.

The emotional support that Rose and Van Rensselaer offered each other was clearly more important for them than any financial concerns, although it was often difficult for a single woman to keep a household by herself. After all, the two were cochairs of a department and later codeans of a college within a major university. According to Van Rensselaer's biographer, when Flora Rose was offered a higher salary than her partner because she had advanced degrees in the field she refused, preferring to maintain their equality in all things. The fact that Isabel Bevier, chair of the Department of Home Economics at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, lived alone on her salary is proof that it was perfectly possible to do so. Many of the women in the home economics movement, however, seem to have chosen not to do so. Louise Stanley, chief of the federal Bureau of Home Economics, was the highest paid woman in government in her day, yet she lived with two other women. Sarah Arnold, dean of Simmons College and an advocate of home economics at Simmons, lived in a lifelong partnership with Dr. Mary G. Hood, a physician. Rose and Van Rensselaer and their contemporaries seem to have paired up, then, not solely or even primarily for economic motives but because they shared the notion that the heart of a household was partnership.¹⁰

Rose and Van Rensselaer had created a household that was, in miniature, a version of the new social order their work implicitly advocated. Each woman performed household duties and provided nurture and support, but neither would have been defined within the home by her performance of "woman's work." Because both partners performed both female and male roles in the

¹⁰Caroline Percival, *Martha Van Rensselaer* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Alumni Association of the New York State College of Home Economics at Cornell University, 1957), 10. Bevier seems to have opened her home on occasion to students who could not afford housing. In praise of Bevier's home as one "surprisingly free from superfluous furnishings and processes which can, so easily, become hindrances instead of affording satisfaction," former student and later University of Illinois staff member Anna Van Meter noted that because of Bevier's "simplicity in management it has been possible for her to offer a home with opportunity for self-help to one and another young woman who, otherwise, might have met disheartening difficulties in the way of finishing a college course." Box 2, folder "Bevier Anecdotes 1929-," Isabel Bevier Papers, University Archives, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

partnership—household work and wage earning—they removed gender from its usual associations with domesticity. According to these ideals, two professional home economists living together performed housework not because they were women but because they had the academic background to do it. In addition, the fact that housework was something professionals could and would do elevated it out of the status of female drudgery. If the dean of a college could do the dusting, then the work would be liberated from its traditional association with unskilled womanhood. Women, in turn, would be liberated from their association with the work that came to them “naturally,” and the rewards for their work would be emotional—the sense of having served one’s family well—rather than intellectual. These ideas about housework and its relation to gender ideology were part of a new ideal of marital partnership that many members of the first generation of home economists shared and attempted, through a variety of means, to propagate.

In 1927 Martha Van Rensselaer assigned the book *Companionate Marriage*, by the famous jurist Benjamin Barr Lindsey, to her students in a class entitled *Woman and the Family*. The controversial book argued that procreation need not be the sole basis for marriage and that a childless marriage maintained through birth control could be just as satisfying and was as morally acceptable as one with children. Lindsay wrote not only of companionate marriage, in which partners remained together but did not have children, but also of the more sensational “trial marriage,” in which partners lived together for several months in order to decide whether to marry. Assigning the book reflected Van Rensselaer’s sense that marriage was an evolving institution rather than a fixed quantity and that it was appropriate to encourage students to question basic traditions, particularly in the realm of domestic life and relationships between men and women, as part of their training in home economics.

When Albert R. Mann, the dean of the agriculture school, of which home economics was then a department, objected to the book, Van Rensselaer defended it vigorously. To twenty-first-century eyes her reply seems empowered by the need to defend her own relationship with Rose, a companionate marriage if there ever was one. Van Rensselaer’s response to Dean Mann was polite but self-assured. She wrote to him:

There has been no question in my mind as to the desirability of discussing in connection with a course on the family types of marriage and marriage customs past and present. My own reaction against trial marriage would prevent my introducing that subject but if it were introduced I should feel called upon to express an opinion. The question of companionate marriage is distinct from trial marriage. It insists on a state of lawful wedlock for those couples who for one reason or another do not wish to contribute children to society or are not ready to do so. It seems worthy of frank discussion. In fact, I would go farther

than than [*sic*] and say that we older people who have well adjusted lives must discuss these things with the younger generation. They discuss them among themselves with greatest freedom and frankness and they need whatever help we can give them. . . . While I would not be in a position to prefer companionate marriages, they must be recognized as very common among people of our acquaintance and in society generally.¹¹

What this response makes clear is that Van Rensselaer was holding her ground against the dean of a college. She seemed to suggest that she knew more about the subject than he did, offering to lend him the book and noting that “I agree with you that ‘discussions of this character are exceedingly dangerous except in the hands of persons fully competent to guide them, with great wisdom.’” Although noting that she was not in a position to declare herself such a guide, she asked: “Is not the guidance of a sane adjusted adult better than the present undercurrent discussions with no guidance whatever?” Seeming to deny her own authority in one sentence, she subtly reasserted it in the next. She was a “sane adjusted adult” and one of those “older people who have well adjusted lives,” despite the fact that she had never been married to a man, did not have children, and shared her life with another woman. Such sane adjusted people, she argued, had a responsibility to recognize that their students were aware of sex, that they discussed it amongst themselves, and that they could not but benefit from informed guidance and frank discussion of the issues. Not to discuss the book with students would be “to indicate that we do not feel that young people are frank and fine enough to discuss a matter of this importance.”¹²

The fact that she was unmarried and living with a woman did not, in Van Rensselaer’s mind, disqualify her from giving guidance on the issue of sex in marriage. It is significant to note that she described herself as not in “a position” to prefer companionate marriages, but at the same time she distanced herself from the more shocking idea of trial marriage. She did not say that she was against companionate marriages in which couples chose not to have children, however, and pointed out to Mann that to do so would be to condemn the lifestyle of many people who were respected personal friends of both the dean and herself. This reference to their shared social circle, which included academics and state officials, suggests, in fact, that companionate marriage was at the time often the choice of the serious, the intellectual, and those committed to causes of human progress.

There is another aspect to this discussion of childless marriage that does not seem to have played a part in Van Rensselaer’s experience. For professional and academic women of this era having children generally

¹¹Martha Van Rensselaer to A. R. Mann, December 22, 1927, box 33, folder 26, NYSCHP Papers.

¹²*Ibid.*

meant giving up their careers, so the so-called companionate marriage was probably often a difficult matter of choosing between two incompatible desires and not a choice made easily or freely. Interestingly, Van Rensselaer herself once sought to adopt a boy. While on a trip to Holland she attempted to discover if there were any orphans connected to her famous family living in Holland. A boy was presented to her by a local orphanage, but she was unsatisfied with the proof of his connection to her family and did not proceed with the adoption. In the context of her mentorship of future homemakers, though, it is interesting to note that it was apparently the child himself and not her career or her status as an unmarried woman that prevented her from following through with the plan.¹³

What is equally important, though, is that Van Rensselaer argued against the dean by using examples from their shared social circle, mixing the academic—here, the assignment of a text—with the purely personal and arguing that the links between the two were illuminating rather than a distraction. Throughout her professional life she worked at revealing and strengthening the connections between the professional and the personal, not hesitating to allow her own relationships to inform her work.

On other occasions Van Rensselaer defended her right to participate in the contemporary discussion of sexuality as an expert. Several years later in 1932, as a member of the White House Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, Van Rensselaer caused a stir when she included questions about sexual activity on a questionnaire that was to be sent out to families across the nation. *Los Angeles Times* columnist Harry Carr reported that the questions included: “Where do you do your lovemaking? Is it indoors or out? What members of the family take part?” The outraged Carr noted that it was “an unmarried lady who heads the subcommittee on Housing and Family Development” who had asked these questions. Van Rensselaer claimed that she had been asked to change the word “lovemaking,” which still meant “courtship” at the time, but her wishes had not been carried out. Overall, she seemed unperturbed by the attacks that followed, only sorry that a government agency should take the blame for her choice. From the amused tone of her responses it is clear that she considered courtship or romantic activity to be an essential part of human life and that she saw the home as a place for many kinds of affection. It becomes interesting to consider, then, how she might have answered her own questionnaire. The report of the committee, issued after analysis of the questionnaires, recommended that families set aside a room where daughters might entertain male callers.¹⁴

¹³Flora Rose? “Informal Notes about Martha Van Rensselaer: Prepared for Miss Caroline Percival,” box 34, folder 19, NYSCHÉ Papers.

¹⁴Clipping from *Los Angeles Times*, January 8, 1932, in a note from Martha Van Rensselaer, January 18, 1932. Letter from Martha Van Rensselaer to W. T. Miller, February 2, 1932, box 33, folder 56, NYSCHÉ Papers.

WORKING AT HOME

What Van Rensselaer's exchange with A. R. Mann over *Companionate Marriage* and her inclusion of sexuality in a national questionnaire on housing reveal is that she did not believe in creating boundaries between the personal and the academic. Rather, it is clear that she felt a special responsibility to make what was considered private the subject of public inquiry. In this spirit she and her partner worked to domesticate academia at the same time that they took an academic approach to domesticity.

For Rose and Van Rensselaer the home economics department became an extension of home and home a miniature version of the department. Van Rensselaer, for instance, sent New Year's greetings to Louise Stanley's office in Washington that explicitly blended professional and personal relations: "May I wish you and the others of your professional and your home family a very happy and prosperous new year."¹⁵ Rather than abandoning the female world of emotional ties and sociability to enter the male world of higher education and science, Van Rensselaer and Stanley brought this world with them into their department, arguing by their every action that there was nothing unprofessional about being a woman.

Throughout her career Van Rensselaer corresponded with numerous other professional women living in similar domestic arrangements, and her letters demonstrate how valued such relationships were and how central they were to the ideals that home economists espoused. Just before Christmas in 1926 Van Rensselaer wrote to Louise Stanley: "May you and your household have a very happy holiday season. I hope the youngest member is there and if she is you will all have a good time I am sure."¹⁶ Louise Stanley lived with two other pioneers for women's rights. In 1925 Stanley was living with Annabel Matthews, a lawyer for the Treasury Department who became the first female judge on the Tax Board, when their household expanded to include Mabel Walker Willebrandt, a lawyer who was the first woman to argue a case before the Supreme Court. The three women lived together in a house in Washington, D.C., with Willebrandt's daughter, Dorothy, whom she had adopted after her marriage ended. Stanley and Willebrandt appear to have been close, although Willebrandt did seriously consider marrying a male friend during this period.¹⁷

Earlier in the same year, in praise of this household Van Rensselaer wrote to Stanley, thanking her for her hospitality during a trip that she and Rose

¹⁵Martha Van Rensselaer to Louise Stanley, January 10, 1929, box 22, Correspondence Pi-Rn, Office of Home Economics Papers, Record Group 176, National Archives and Records Administration.

¹⁶Martha Van Rensselaer to Louise Stanley, December 23, 1926, in *ibid.*

¹⁷See Dorothy M. Brown, *Mabel Walker Willebrandt: A Study of Power, Loyalty, and Law* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 126 ff. Brown does not suggest any particular intimacy between Willebrandt and Stanley. Her biography does not include any discussion of Stanley beyond her role as Dorothy's doting "Aunt Weezy" (131).

had recently made to Washington, D.C. “The opportunity to go into your delightful home,” she told her friend, “will be treasured. It is a great success and I think those of us who are enjoying making a home appreciate knowing when other people think we have succeeded. I was glad too to meet those who are sharing this. You certainly have a happy combination. I consider it a rare privilege to meet Mrs. W and to have heard her. It was a pleasure I had not anticipated and which I would not have missed.”¹⁸ Van Rensselaer’s congratulations to Stanley reflected both her professional ideals and her personal circumstances. A household was an institution to be established carefully and to be prized when it was well assembled. She identified herself, as well as Stanley, Matthews, and Willebrandt, as among those who were consciously making a home. For the domestic scientist this household of three women and a girl was no less perfect for its lack of a man.

Stanley, Willebrandt, and Dorothy visited Ithaca together and also spent time at Van Rensselaer and Rose’s vacation house on an island in the Adirondacks. Letters between Stanley and Van Rensselaer during the 1920s portray the three women from Washington as a family unit. In October 1926, for instance, Stanley wrote to Van Rensselaer that “we should love to come up and bring Dorothy but I am not sure that that can be. I hope very much she can come for your Farmers’ Week. Tell Miss Nye Dorothy still talks about the lady who *would* eat with the wrong hand.”¹⁹ To emphasize the domesticity of such arrangements was, on the one hand, to respect a friend’s circumstances, but when one was leader of a movement to redefine domesticity it was, on the other hand, to endorse these circumstances as an alternative model of home life.

Archival material, both private and public, reveals that the intimate relationship these women shared with each other was accepted by those who knew them well. In 1910 Arthur Dean, chief of the division of trade schools in the New York City Board of Education and a friend of Van Rensselaer and Rose, sent the pair a copy of his latest book. As explanation for why he sent only one book to two women Dean wrote that “as long as you are inseparable, you can just as well sit on that long sofa and read the book together.”²⁰ Van Rensselaer responded with a friendly letter in which she was quite open about the intimate arrangements of her household. She said that she and Rose liked the book and that “we have no idea of separating, therefore, one book is as good as two. Miss Rose sometimes reads me to sleep. At such times one book is as good as two, but it won’t be this one that I go to sleep on.”²¹ The book Dean sent his friends was probably his

¹⁸Martha Van Rensselaer to Louise Stanley, March 3, 1926, box 22, Correspondence Pi–Rn.

¹⁹Louise Stanley to Martha Van Rensselaer, October 6, 1926, in *ibid.*

²⁰Arthur Dean to Martha Van Rensselaer, November 1, 1910, box 11, folder 34, NYSCHÉ Papers.

²¹Letter from Martha Van Rensselaer to Arthur Dean, November 5, 1910, in *ibid.* Although the letter does not specifically place the two women in bed together, I would argue that the

The Worker and the State: A Study of Education for Industrial Workers, published in 1910, and Van Rensselaer may have been underestimating its soporific powers. Reading the book together at bedtime, then, and sharing with Dean the image of themselves thus engaged was an indication both of how comfortable they felt in making public their private relationship and of their habit of keeping the boundaries between the professional and domestic as fluid as possible. Dean's letter and Van Rensselaer's response give no sense that either considered the intimacy of the two women illicit in any way. To the contrary, Dean seemed to celebrate their physical and intellectual closeness with his friendly teasing about their habit of reading together and his familiarity with their domestic arrangements.

Letters preserved in collections of professional papers of other pioneers in the home economics movement are sprinkled throughout with similar allusions to the personal. Many, like the letter from Dean, refer to partnerships openly and happily. Gretchen Gunther, apparently a home economist at Teachers College of Columbia University in New York, wrote to Van Rensselaer in 1912 discussing Van Rensselaer's plans to visit New York while Gunther and "Betty," who shared her apartment, were away. Gunther wrote: "Dear Friend, Yes to be sure we want you to use our apartment. Betty does, because she is the real 'boss' there, but I do, too, because I want you to have a cozy bed while there to help rest your weary bones. I take my partner's dictation now. Isn't Lady Rose going? I hope so. . . . Across the street is the laundry laboratory."²² Gunther referred to her own relationship, in which Betty, her "partner," was "boss," and to Van Rensselaer's partner affectionately as "the lady Rose." Gunther expressed her and her partner's shared affection for the two women and their concern for Van Rensselaer's well-being. No less important, she added a line to draw attention to the laundry laboratory—a local point of interest for visiting home economists.

The clearest appreciations of the partnerships that bound many home economists came when one member of a pair died. Then friends and colleagues wrote to eulogize not just the dead woman but the relationship itself. Eulogies for Van Rensselaer, like the one quoted at the beginning of this article, all mentioned Rose as her partner. In addition, sympathy notes to Rose memorialized and celebrated the partnership of the two women, frequently commenting on how it served as an example to others. For

notion of Rose sitting beside her friend's bed to read to her may betray more of a maternal scenario in Dean's mind than a relationship of loving equals, which is how the two women clearly saw themselves.

²²Gretchen Gunther to Martha Van Rensselaer, July 15, 1912, box 33, folder 39, NYSCHE Papers. Gunther was going to the Lake Placid Club, a fascinating adult summer camp organized by educator, library reformer, and State University of New York provost Melvil Dewey and his wife, Anna. The club was a place for academics and intellectuals to spend vacations, but it was also a place for conferences such as the Lake Placid Conference on Home Economics, which launched the home economics movement in 1899.

example, Alma Talbot wrote that “yours was a classic friendship between two like minded women whose partnership has furnished the educational world with a model for training women of all ages and conditions to a forward looking manner of living and thinking.”²³ Talbot congratulated Rose on the model she and Van Rensselaer had established, drawing an explicit connection between their professional work and their private life. She also placed it within the context of a tradition of publicly accepted female partnerships, which were, in fact, on the wane. The relationship was special but not unusual; it was a “classic” of its kind, a kind that Talbot accepted as fully legitimate and meaningful.

Similarly, Ruby Green Smith, a leader in the home demonstration extension services in New York State, suggested that it would be a comfort to Rose to remember that her partner lived on “in one of the most beautiful friendships the earth has ever known—yours and hers.” Smith also noted that the memory of the relationship would continue to inspire others. “To those of us who have watched you together,” she wrote, “your comradeship pointed the way to friendship’s possibilities—gleaming, like the Washington Monument, above, to inspire all who see it—gleaming above less perfectly adjusted human relationships.” This image of their relationship as the City on a Hill, Green suggested (the phallic nature of the monument aside), was the perfect combination of intellectual and romantic sympathies in synchronicity: “When I see you two together, I think of the Browning lines ‘To have your brain prompt mine, Your heart anticipate my heart.’”²⁴ Virginia Roderick, a magazine editor, also reminded Rose that “together you gave hundreds of people the inspiring day-by-day sight of a rare friendship.”²⁵ Those hundreds of people, of course, were the college community in which the pair established first the department and then the college of home economics. It is apparent from Roderick’s note that she, like Van Rensselaer and Rose, believed that a professor could supply meaningful examples through her personal life of what she advocated in her professional role. Far from glossing over the romantic nature of this partnership, sympathetic friends and colleagues praised and perhaps even envied it. Noting that “I have never experienced the rare quality of companionship with another friend for a span of years such as yours with ‘Miss Van,’” Frances Searles, who wrote in purple ink, concluded that such friendships “are, I believe, as rare as diamonds or rainbows in the world.”²⁶

Rose herself later passed on this same sympathetic reflection on partnership when another female couple was divided by death. In 1954 Rose wrote to her old friend and former Cornell colleague Beulah Blackmore. Blackmore’s partner, Helen Canon, also a Cornell home economist, was

²³Alma Talbot to Flora Rose, May 27, 1932, box 34, folder 5, NYSCHE Papers.

²⁴Ruby Green Smith to Flora Rose, May 27, 1932, in *ibid.*

²⁵Letter from Virginia Roderick to Flora Rose, May 26, 1932, in *ibid.*

²⁶Frances Searles to Flora Rose, May 31, 1932, in *ibid.*

dying. Rose wrote: "I could weep with you my Beulah but I could be happy too for the richness which the togetherness of you and Helen has given each of you. A precious thing indeed and eternal." When Canon died, Rose wrote again to reassure her friend that "the memories have built themselves into the tissue of your life and Helen will live again for you. Martha is as real to me after all these years as if she were here. Often I find myself saying to myself 'I must tell that to Martha.'"²⁷ Rose recognized the "togetherness" of the two women as a source of strength rather than simply a convenient living arrangement. For Rose there was no question but that a female partnership could be "eternal" and that it fortified each partner even after the death of one.

Another friend, E. Lee Vincent, who later became dean of Cornell's College of Home Economics and who participated in her own long-standing relationship with a woman named Lucille, wrote to Blackmore to celebrate not only Blackmore and Canon's relationship but also Rose and Van Rensselaer's:

Martha Van, Flora Rose, Helen Canon and Beulah Blackmore. . . . What a quartette that is—two sets of friends who gave each other supplementation at critical points, who supported each other thru every vicissitude, who worked and built, shared and lived together in a whole pattern that has become a way of life for professional women fortunate enuf to have known any one of you, or, like me, all of you.²⁸

Despite the fact that by the 1950s female partnerships had become suspect in the mainstream culture, a culture more aware of and more hostile toward female homosexuality, there is no sense here that she was congratulating her friends on having successfully hidden the nature of their relationships from anyone. Rather, there is only praise; indeed, the equality that older pairs modeled for others is represented as an ideal for younger friends establishing partnerships with other women.

The sense of an academic department as a home was strong for Van Rensselaer and Rose and was perhaps more pronounced because of their profession. In a letter to a friend in 1913 Van Rensselaer wrote that "we moved into our new building about two months ago and are like young housekeepers, very much absorbed in getting settled. It is fascinating, if not perplexing, and sometimes irritating."²⁹ She portrayed herself and her faculty and staff as a family settling into a new home rather than as professionals opening a new facility. By describing herself as a newlywed she expressed her deep commitment to the field itself and the tendency of movement leaders to blur lines between the domestic and the academic as a way of

²⁷Flora Rose to Beulah Blackmore, June 30, 1954, box 26, folder 25, NYSCHÉ Papers.

²⁸E. Lee Vincent to Beulah Blackmore, August 13, 1954, in *ibid.*

²⁹Martha Van Rensselaer to Mrs. Carpenter, April 3, 1913, box 33, folder 39, NYSCHÉ Papers.

reinforcing the status of their work and of household labor in general. Anyone who knew her would also have thought of her relationship with Rose, simultaneously personal and professional, and how this new building was in part a validation of that loving and efficient partnership.

Even in dealing with state politics Van Rensselaer mixed the personal and intimate with the professional. Writing to Eleanor Roosevelt after her husband's election as governor of New York, Van Rensselaer thanked her friend for "the splendid service which you have given our college" by publicly supporting it. She then sympathized with Roosevelt about the coming growth in her public duties, celebrated the consequent expansion of her opportunities for service, and, finally, cautioned her to take care of herself, suggesting a private vacation and reminding the new governor's wife that "the house in Ithaca may serve as a refuge whenever one is needed" and that "my little Chrysler is at your disposal."³⁰ Van Rensselaer's concern for Roosevelt as a professional ally was inextricably mixed with her regard for her as a personal friend. The combination was indicative not merely of Van Rensselaer's personality but of the character of the movement—the home that she offered to Roosevelt as a retreat from the world of politics was simultaneously a hive of activity and the local headquarters for a movement. The letter has another interesting implication. Because the invitation did not include Mr. Roosevelt, whom Van Rensselaer also knew, it suggests that Eleanor was most comfortable and could most truly relax in the company of other women. This is, of course, not surprising to anyone who knows anything about Eleanor Roosevelt's life and her intimate friendships with other women, but it is an interesting expression of this generation's tendency to value same-sex relationships very deeply.³¹

The mixing of personal and professional is found throughout Van Rensselaer's papers. In a 1927 letter to a Dr. Cornelius Betten, dean of faculty at Cornell, on the eve of a conference at Cornell on home economics, Van Rensselaer wrote: "Miss Rose and I are inviting the group to our house for dinner on Thursday night at 6:30 and will be glad to have you come also. We are not making this a social occasion and inviting the wives because undoubtedly the committee will want to resume their deliberations at the dinner hour and afterwards."³² For Rose and Van Rensselaer having

³⁰Martha Van Rensselaer to Eleanor Roosevelt, November 12, 1928, box 32, folder 8, NYSCHÉ Papers.

³¹For comprehensive discussions of Roosevelt's romantic relationships with other women and her many friendships with same-sex female couples see Blanche Wiesen Cook's two-volume biography of Roosevelt, *Eleanor Roosevelt*, vol. 1, 1884–1933 (New York: Viking, 1992), and vol. 2, *The Defining Years, 1933–1938* (New York: Penguin, 2000); see also *Empty Without You: The Intimate Letters of Eleanor Roosevelt and Lorena Hickock* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000).

³²Martha Van Rensselaer to Dr. C. E. Betten, February 28, 1927, box 32, folder 7, NYSCHÉ Papers. While male professionals might invite a boss over for dinner during this era, this was done to impress the superior rather than as a means to continue the specific work of the office in another place. In such situations a wife would be expected to perform as hostess,

a group to dinner at their private home did not necessarily constitute a social occasion. As long as the wives, those women who were present only as companions and not as professionals, were not there, the event was one of business. The fact that she felt she had to make the distinction plain to Betten suggests that she was aware that most people did not think of their homes in the way that she and Rose did—as a venue for professional life. The invitation argues against the notion that activities within the home—and particularly perhaps the home of two women—are by nature not “important.” Just because we are at home, Van Rensselaer’s letter announces, does not mean that we are not working. And just because we are working does not mean that we are not at home.

The mixing of personal and professional also typifies Rose’s lifelong attitude. When Rose invited a friend to stay with her during the dedication of Martha Van Rensselaer Hall on the Cornell University campus, two years after Van Rensselaer’s death, there was scant discrimination between her private home and the new building that would serve as her professional headquarters. “I shall rejoice in having you as a member of my household and to share my shabby old house with me. . . . The equipping of our building is by no means complete. First because our money has given out and second because it takes a longer time to put in the finishing touches that make a difference between a house and a home.”³³ The letter echoes Van Rensselaer’s earlier conflation of a new building with a young couple’s first home. The guest would be staying in Rose’s private home, but what she was really there to see was the public home, the new home economics building. Rose wanted the two places to be equally welcoming, equally homelike. This was not just because she had a generous nature but because making an academic building homelike seemed to her and her colleagues simultaneously to make home life academic.

LET’S PLAY HOUSE

It is clear that home economists did not consciously model female households as the domestic ideal for their students. They did, however, by necessity include practice in such households as an important part of the curriculum. Beginning in Illinois in 1909, home economics departments began adding “practice houses” to their facilities.³⁴ The practice houses, ranging

not coworker, despite the fact that her work in the home in such situations made her very much the (unpaid) partner of her husband. This particular instance is complicated slightly by the fact that Betten’s wife was an instructor in textiles and clothing at Cornell. She was, however, apparently not a member of the decision-making group that Van Rensselaer referred to and so was apparently not welcome at the meeting.

³³Flora Rose to Juliet (no last name), January 30, 1934, box 32, folder 4, NYSCHÉ Papers.

³⁴Illinois also opened a practice apartment, both to make room for more household management students and to address the particular issues of living in an apartment.

from single-family detached homes to apartments to a suite of rooms in an academic building, were the laboratories for courses in household management. The courses frequently involved a group of students, usually more than four but less than ten, living for a period of several weeks together in a house or apartment that had been outfitted to resemble a real home. During their period of residence students rotated household roles, some cooking, some cleaning, some working on budgets, some on decoration, and one serving as “hostess.”

Wherever it was possible childcare was also part of the course. Some departments, like Cornell’s, made arrangements with local orphanages to adopt an infant temporarily. The child was then reared by students who worked as a group. While participating in childcare students continued to perform other household duties as well as to attend classes and complete assignments for other courses. Motherhood, then, was experienced as compatible (more or less hectically) with intellectual or professional development. Every six weeks or so the child would acquire a new group of “mothers.” Children would stay in the practice home until a family could be found to adopt them, which never took very long. Adopting couples clamored to get the scientifically raised Cornell babies. Far from being put off by the idea of a child raised by a collective of female experts, families considered these the best possible infants.³⁵ By “borrowing” parentless infants for the practice house home economists used the fruits of other women’s misfortune to bolster their own professionalism. At the same time, bringing students into contact (if only obliquely) with the consequences of poverty and lack of birth control made students more aware of the world in which they lived and especially of issues faced by women. As self-contained a fantasy as the practice house seemed, it also had the potential to teach students about adult issues.

There was also much affection for the “practice babies” in the college community. Their pictures were featured in student newspapers, and faculty doted on them. In a letter to Amy Daniels, who worked at the Child Welfare Research Station at the University of Iowa, Flora Rose wrote of Cornell’s practice baby: “We have had much pleasure this spring and summer in feeding our practice house baby. . . . He is now six months old and weighs eighteen pounds. That sounds very heavy, but he is not a fat baby. His flesh is firm and pink, and his eyes a brilliant blue. For a common, or garden baby, we all think him quite remarkable.”³⁶ Rose playfully mixed the perspectives of a mother and a scientist here, a combination that would have seemed entirely appropriate to her.

³⁵An unsigned and unsent letter dated 1935 written in response to questions apparently posed by Faith R. Inman of Ohio State University School of Home Economics explains that “people wishing to adopt the babies are anxious to obtain a baby which has been started at the college.” In a May 21, 1929, letter Claribel Nye reported to Van Rensselaer that she had met a woman at a Farmer’s Club who wanted to adopt a Cornell baby. Box 32, folder 43, NYSCHÉ Papers.

³⁶Flora Rose to Amy Daniels, February 23, 1921, box 11, folder 32, NYSCHÉ Papers.

The “practice babies” might even have provided an opportunity to strengthen the bonds of same-sex relationships. In 1928, through her friends in home economics at Cornell, Louise Stanley looked into obtaining one of Cornell’s “model babies” for her cohabitant, Mabel Willebrandt, who apparently thought of adopting a boy. While the adoption does not seem to have proceeded, the fact that it was considered represents the close links between leaders of the movement. The boy in question would have moved straight from Van Rensselaer and Rose’s professional home into Stanley and Willebrandt’s private one, keeping the fruits of home economics training within the circle of its female leadership.³⁷

Above all, the practice houses were occasions for performing the principles of the home economics movement. According to a departmental bulletin, the practice house and apartments at Cornell provided “a laboratory where students have the opportunity to develop an appreciation of gracious living in a home environment, and an understanding of some of the problems of group living. They are also helped to relate the theory of foods and nutrition, household arts, child care and development, economics of the household and home management to actual practice.”³⁸ Students were graded not simply on how they performed household tasks but also on how well they worked with others in their communal enterprise. The ideal homemaker, then, was one who not only managed all household work well but also could work constructively with others. The lessons that such experiences taught young women were strikingly at odds with common notions of married life. The phrase “problems of group living” itself does not conjure up the traditional picture of married life. In the practice house a woman was a member of a team rather than solely responsible for all things domestic. She shared tasks with other people who were her equals.

³⁷In a letter of May 12, 1928, Van Rensselaer told Stanley that there were two practice-house infants available, one who must go to a Catholic home and one who might go to a Protestant home. In May Stanley answered that Willebrandt “will be very glad to have you send me a statement about the protestant boy” but that she might not be able to decide anything quickly. In a letter on June 12, 1928, Van Rensselaer informed Stanley that the boy had not yet been adopted and added, “You mentioned his hair. It is not red but rather an attractive brown. He has long eyelashes with very bewitching eyes.” Box 8, folder of letters from Van Rensselaer and Rose to Stanley, Office of Home Economics Papers, Record Group 176, National Archives and Records Administration.

³⁸“Dept of Economics of the Household, Aim of the Department,” March 27, 1934, box 11, folder 53, NYSCHE Papers. The word “gracious” is very telling here as it suggests that students were supposed to be learning “taste” as well as acquiring skills. The question of the home economics aesthetic and its political background and implications is one that deserves attention. For one excellent discussion of morality and aesthetics within the movement see Jan Jennings, “Controlling Passion: The Turn-of-the-Century Wallpaper Dilemma,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 31, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 243–64. Jennings’s article is a fascinating exploration of wallpaper as an element in women’s control over their domestic environments. The article includes a discussion of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s story “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

Equality in domestic roles was central to the nature of the practice house. Although a faculty member lived in the house she was there only as a consultant and turned “the house over to the group for them to solve the problems as they will. Each girl is made to feel that the house belongs to her as much as to any other individual during the five weeks she lives there: it is her home, a place in which to work and plan, to entertain and to have as much fun as possible.”³⁹ Students in the practice house kept up with their other classes while also taking care of the house, briefly experiencing a life in which domestic work was balanced with and rated equal to intellectual development.

The practice house differed from the ordinary middle-class home in another very important aspect—it was exclusively female. The students were spurred on to do their best at each task because they were in constant competition and cooperation with a group of other female students. The collective spirit that made the practice house so interesting for those who were living in it actually made it inappropriate as a “practice” house. The homes that students would likely make as they married and had children would for the most part be solitary endeavors in which each woman performed all of the duties all of the time. Some might have the privilege of hired help, but the assumption throughout the curriculum in home economics at Cornell and other universities was that each woman would have primary responsibility for her home. As children grew tasks might be delegated to them, and husbands could sometimes be counted on for help around the house, but the bulk of the domestic work a woman would do would be nothing like the all-female teamwork she had practiced and been assessed on at school.

The systems established in practice houses can be seen as unconscious enactments of the home life that the leaders of the home economics movement thought ought to be rather than what was. In the ideal, domestic work was as important as work done outside the house, and it was performed by teams of equals who rotated roles. Each member of the team was able to live a life outside the home as well as inside the home, ideally, one that both informed her domestic work and was informed by it. This balance between home and the wider world was basic to the movement. The woman whose entire focus was her home and family, exclusive of world and local events and her own personal development, was no more a good housekeeper than the woman who did no housework at all. The movement hoped to rationalize housework in order to make this work a more fully integrated part of modern society.

The female environment of the practice houses was recognized by contemporaries. In 1928 two male professors in the College of Arts and Sciences at Cornell published a poem in the *Saturday Evening Post* from the perspective of a practice baby. As a child, the professors surmised, he was blissfully happy:

³⁹New York State College of Home Economics, “The Practice House,” manuscript dated November 7, 1928, box 32, folder 9, NYSCHE Papers.

With the lips and eyes of a valentine
 and a smile from the Sunday comics;
 he was the Practice Baby in a College of Home Economics.

.....
 "Oh what a lucky baby I am!"

He often used to cry,

"To have a hundred Mammams
 to make me hush-a-by!"

But in adulthood he felt disappointed and yearned for his
 earlier life,

And now he's grown to be a man,
 and grievously he misses

the care of his Model Mammams,
 their cuddling and their kisses;

and oft he murmurs to himself,
 with his scowl from the Sunday comics;

"Do they need a Practice Husband
 In the college of Home Economics?"⁴⁰

From the point of view of these two male professors the practice house served as a sort of harem with a baby pasha. Its primary interest lay in its abundance of motherly young women. For the grown-up baby life without this surfeit of female attention is disappointing. The authors mock the premise of the practice house as a place that was unusually female and therefore not a good preparation for heterosexual marriage and motherhood at the same time that they find the idea titillating. The poem also serves as a reminder that home economics departments consistently had a difficult time convincing academics in other departments that their work was legitimate. In this instance a group of home economics students responded with a poem that concluded:

But if *all* the practice house babies
 came back on some future day,
 they *might* be model husbands,
 but they'd be awfully in the way!⁴¹

While the students conceded that it might be possible to educate men to be model husbands, they retained the idea that even the best men were superfluous to the functioning of a well-run home, particularly if they were all to come "home" at once.

⁴⁰Morris Bishop and J. H. Mason, "The Practice Baby," *Saturday Evening Post*, May 5, 1928.

⁴¹"A Few of the Model Mamas" and "The Reply," *Home Economics Reminder: A Quarterly Publication by the New York State College of Home Economics at Cornell University* (September 1928), box 32, folder 12, NYCSCHE Papers.

It was, of course, not feasible in the era when practice houses were common to have men living in practice houses acting like husbands. If it had been culturally possible for male students to take these courses and for the practice house to be “coed,” then the progressive notion of shared domestic labor might have been modeled within the practice homes. The fact that no female student was given the role of “husband” subtly implied that it was a nonessential role in the ideal home. The practice house suggested an idea that home economists never made explicit, that for the home to truly function at its best and most modern it must be run by a team. Men would have to accept domestic responsibilities and recognize women as their social equals if the ideal of domestic balance were ever to be achieved within marriage. Rose and Van Rensselaer’s department did offer courses specifically for men, and, whenever asked, the two, like many other academic home economists, insisted that there was no reason for men not to take their courses. However, neither they nor any of the major figures in the movement made any real effort to get men involved as students or as professors, and there was a sense that men took home economics only out of temporary necessity—to learn how to run their fraternity houses, for instance—rather than in a true vocational spirit. The home economics classes that Cornell men were most likely to take—institutional management—quickly became isolated in a new department, hotel management, situating male domesticity firmly in the world of profit making, while opportunities for female graduates were defined in both private and public terms.⁴²

There are many possible reasons why home economists did not follow the implications of the practice house to its logical conclusion and insist on male involvement. Very few of the movement’s leaders actually lived with men, so that in their own daily lives the ideal had already been achieved and was therefore not a pressing issue. Another likely reason was that making such demands or pointing out the inherent inequality of separate spheres was controversial and would have drawn the kind of attention that home economists did not want. Although Rose and Van Rensselaer and others in the movement were involved in the struggle for women’s suffrage, they were careful to keep their politics quiet.⁴³ In need of funding from state

⁴²At a farmer’s Institute in Columbia, Missouri, in 1909 Van Rensselaer did declare that “men are needed in the kitchen; . . . men have been trained to greater executive ability than women, and . . . for this reason, if they had to spend a week in the kitchen the work of the kitchen would either cease entirely or would be vastly improved.” She did not, however, suggest that they stay past the reorganization process as partners in the domestic endeavor. *St. Louis Republic*, January 11, 1909, box 11, folder 31, NYSCHÉ Papers.

⁴³In a November 12, 1911, letter to Kathryn Chamberlain, who had asked for Van Rensselaer and Rose to provide a quote on suffrage, writing that “I assume you are believers,” Van Rensselaer responded: “I do not believe I could give you anything very definite upon the suffrage question. I am getting my knowledge somewhat in hand and have more definite views than I used to have. Some day I shall put it into shape and be able to tell people what I believe. I sometimes do now in conversation, but I have nothing to have printed yet.” Box 23, folder 17, NYSCHÉ Papers.

legislatures and acceptance by the culture at large, home economists would have been hesitant to state openly the more radical implications of their movement. Some may also have been afraid of drawing attention to their own relationships by attacking traditional gender roles within marriage. Most likely, home economists of the first generation did not even see the implications of the practice house as a serious platform for action. Bound, as most of us are, within the common sense of their times, women like Rose and Van Rensselaer may simply have been unable to look at gender roles as alterable, much as their personal and professional lives challenged them to do so on a daily basis.

Flora Rose and Martha Van Rensselaer, as well as many others of the first generation of home economists, intended their lives to serve as models for their students, expanding notions about what a woman's life might be. They wanted their students to see that women could be self-supporting, that they could be professionals in the accepted sense, and that they could be professionals within the home. What they also modeled for their students, joyfully, if not always consciously, was that women could be emotionally, intellectually, and professionally supportive of each other and that mutual love might make both personal and professional lives more fulfilling.