

Piecing and Reconciling: Eliza Calvert Hall's *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*

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I. Introduction: Leaving Something Behind

"I've been a hard worker all my life," [Aunt Jane] said, seating herself and folding her hands restfully, "but 'most all my work has been the kind that 'perishes with the usin'," as the Bible says. That's the discouraging thing about a woman's work. Milly Amos used to say that if a woman was to see all the dishes that she had to wash before she died, piled up before her in one pile, she'd lie down and die right then and there. I've always had the name 'o bein' a good housekeeper, but when I'm dead and gone there ain't anybody goin' to think o' the floors I've swept, and the tables I've scrubbed, and the old clothes I've patched, and the stockin's I've darned. Abram might 'a' remembered it, but he ain't here. But when one o' my grandchildren or great-grandchildren sees one o' these quilts, they'll think about Aunt Jane, and, wherever I am then, I'll know I ain't forgotten.

"I reckon everybody wants to leave somethin' behind that'll last after they're dead and gone. It don't look like it's worth while to live unless you can do that." (36)¹ Aunt Jane

The author of this passage, Lida Calvert Obenchain, did not forget her own grandmother: she wrote her poetry and fiction under a pen name, Eliza Calvert Hall, made up of her maiden name and her grandmother's maiden name. Her use of her grandmother's name intimates her major themes: women's relationships and their legacies. Long before Alice Walker, Hall went in search of her grandmother's garden to claim the impor-

tance of domestic arts to women's lives and to explore the social and political realities that too often silence women. Hall presents a transformative feminist vision: while she is concerned with achieving what she would have called "equal rights," she claims the importance of women's work and honors the values, moral and aesthetic, of nineteenth century women's culture. Her work belongs on the shelf with that of other important nineteenth century writers like Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman.

Like her heroine Aunt Jane, Hall wanted to "leave somethin' behind that'll last after you're dead and gone." She wrote and lectured on women's rights, determined to do her part to gain suffrage and to insure women's economic independence, and she wrote three collections of short stories and a novel. Like Aunt Jane, she was also a "hard worker all her life" who recognized the "discouraging thing about a woman's work." Hall raised four children herself, then when her daughter Margery contracted tuberculosis, she helped raise her two children; she understood about work that "perishes with the usin'." "I shall have a little story in the *Woman's Home Companion*," she wrote her sister Josie, "but I don't know just when. I want to get back to my writing, but these two babies are a stumbling block in my way" (August 29, 1918).² The author of an early folklore study, *Book of Hand-Woven Coverlets* (1912), Hall saw storytelling as weaving, and in her writing, as in her life, Hall managed to weave together the realities of women's domestic, everyday lives with their aspirations to speak for themselves, their desires for accomplishment and pride in their work. Her writing and life break down distinctions between the public and the private, between politics and the home.

Hall gave voice to women's concerns through her most enduring creation, Aunt Jane, who knits, cooks, gardens, quilts, snaps beans, or sews as she tells stories with subversive messages. Through Jane's voice, Hall develops a female language filled with symbols and imagery borrowed from the domestic arts.

"I hardly know jest where to begin," said Aunt Jane, wrinkling her forehead meditatively and adjusting her [knitting] needles. "Tellin' a story is somethin' like windin' off a skein o' yarn. There's jest two ends to the skein, though, and if you can git

hold o' the right one it easy work. But there's so many ways o' beginning a story, and you never know which one leads straightest to the p'int." (50)

Jane's "rambling" stories focus on everyday life in the small Appalachian town of Goshen, but like their heroines, Sally Ann, Milly Amos, and Jane herself, all "terrible free-spoken" women, they get to their point, speaking out boldly about politics, law, religion, and art. They are simultaneously lyrical and ironic, sentimental and caustic: one might argue that Hall combines the modes of Jewett and Freeman. And in using humor to articulate a feminist agenda, Hall echoes Marietta Holley, whose Josiah Allen's Wife, the narrator of many novels, is Jane's closest literary relative. Like Emily Dickinson's poet, Jane "distills Amazing Sense/From Ordinary Meanings." She should be remembered not just for her quilts but for her storytelling, her language, and her well articulated philosophies about power relations between men and women, women's friendships, and the significance of everyday life.

II. Biography: A Hard Worker all Her Life

"You've got to know a heap about people's lives, child, before you can judge 'em." (94) Aunt Jane

"There's folks that always looks on the bright side and makes the best of everything, and that's like puttin' your quilt together with blue or pink or white or some other pretty color; and there's folks that never see anything but the dark side, always lookin' for trouble, and treasurin' it up after they git it, and they're puttin' their lives together with black, jest like you would put a quilt together with some dark, ugly color. You can spoil the prettiest quilt pieces that ever was made jest by puttin' 'em together with the wrong color, and the best sort o' life is miserable if you don't look at things right and think about 'em right." (35) Aunt Jane

Hall's themes and politics clearly originate in her own life, which was firmly rooted in the kind of nineteenth century women's culture described by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in "The Female World of Love and Ritual." Yet her work also reveals realities explored more recently by women's historians: that the distinc-

tion between the public sphere and the private sphere was less sharply defined in nineteenth century women's lives than previously thought and that pioneering articles like Smith-Rosenberg's might have over-emphasized the separate worlds of women and men. Jane's women friends have a separate women's society, but they also share their lives and goals with men; marriage is a major theme in *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, both critiqued for its inequities and romanticized. Bridging the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Hall's life and work also suggest that the values of women's culture did not lose power at the turn-of-the-century, as some critics have argued. While Hall's work echoes that of Jewett and Freeman and Holley, some of her themes anticipate the next generation of women writers, Edith Wharton, Willa Cather, Mary Austin, Dorothy Canfield, and Susan Glaspell.

Aunt Jane takes control of her life by "look[ing] at things right and think[ing] about 'em right"; she does not let black dominate her quilts. Her creator shared her view but struggled throughout her life with "the dark side" and "trouble," themes which certainly characterize the lives of many of Jane's friends. Jane's dislike of crazy quilts may reflect Hall's own fear of becoming crazy and out of control, like the narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, a writer Hall admired. Late in her mother's life, Hall's daughter wrote: "She had so little self control when I first remember her, but in the last ten or fifteen years she had steadied her outlook on life and was an example of strength and self-sufficiency" (September 8, 1932). Materials about her life are scanty; as I talk about her life, I am aware that I am piecing an incomplete quilt from too few fragments, trying to balance the lights with the darks.

Born in 1856 in Bowling Green, Kentucky, Hall studied in private schools and attended a woman's college, Western Oxford University, in Ohio. She taught for several years in both private and public schools, eventually becoming a principal. One of her pupils was her sister Josie, eight years younger than Lida and her confidant throughout her life. Josie's diary, begun in 1878 when she was fourteen and a pupil in Lida's school, describes a remarkably well-read family; during the two years she kept her diary, she read most of Shakespeare, several Dickens novels, *Jane Eyre*, *The Marble Faun*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Daisy Miller*,

The Life of Charlotte Bronte, *The Lady of the Lake*, and dozens of other novels, historical works and poetry. It may have been Josie's pride in her sister's success that led her to resolve "to read a poem and learn a fact every day in the year 1880" (46) for Lida had just published her first poems.

Monday, September 15 [1879]: Lida received a letter from the editor of *Scribner's Monthly*, which contained a check for fifteen dollars. She told us that she had written two poems and sent them more than a week ago but lest they should not come to anything she had not told, but when she received 7½ dollars apiece she could not keep it from us a minute. (44)

This scene, with its revelation of secret submissions and interest in money earned, and indeed Josie's whole diary, with its descriptions of the activities of her sisters, recalls *Little Women* and Jo's first literary success.

The money would have been welcome for the family of five children and their mother were apparently largely dependent on Lida's income. When Lida was fourteen, her family was torn apart when her father disappeared after he allegedly embezzled funds from the bank in which he worked. The family maintained contact with him—Josie's diary was begun at his request because he wanted to hear details of his children's lives—and many years later he returned. Although Josie's diary suggests a happy family life relatively unburdened by want, Lida grew up watching her mother struggle to support five small children, turning to her siblings for support; local rumor says she took in washing. Lida probably left college because money was needed for her siblings' schooling. Many years later her daughter Cecil would suggest in a letter to Lida's sister Margaret that her grandfather's abandonment profoundly affected her mother's life:

I believe I understand much of her life long revolt against people and the world. Trouble and disappointment in her youth—Grandfather's trouble, must have affected her. I can imagine that she was always naturally proud and fond of ruling. But that must have increased her natural tendencies beyond all reason. (November 14, 1932)

Cecil's view of her mother is suspect partially because the extant letters were written during Lida's final illness, when she was crippled by arthritis and Cecil was her primary caregiver; I

will return to these letters later. But it seems clear that her father's financial failures and departure may well have been the genesis of Hall's interest in emotional cruelty and distance within marriage and her obsession with women's economic dependence, topics which recur in her feminist essays and her fiction. Yet she did dedicate *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* to both her mother and her father. Throughout her life Hall remained closely attached to her mother and her sisters, who continued to live together. Although there may have been many reasons for their decisions, none of Lida's three sisters married, and it is tempting to speculate that Lida's early experience may have influenced her marriage. After a long and apparently conflicted courtship, in 1885, when she was 29, she married William Alexander Obenchain, fifteen years her senior, a former Civil War Major, and the president of Ogden College, a boys school in Bowling Green. Little information about Hall's marriage exists. She never wrote directly about it herself. Almost all of the extant letters date from her move to Texas a year after her husband's death in 1916, and though she asks help from Josie to get a monument put on his grave, she seldom mentions him. Accounts of Major Obenchain from his students, while respectful, present him as a cold, authoritarian man, much like the men Sally Ann criticizes Sally Ann in the first story of *Aunt Jane*.

A man of great dignity, Major Obenchain was remembered by his students for his code of conduct and his stern emphasis upon discipline. In his view a man who removed his coat by his own fireside in the presence of his family was not a gentleman. Nor did a gentleman smoke while walking with a lady. Indeed, a gentleman did not converse with a lady on a street corner lest he compromise her reputation. The Major's students wore coats in class, even during the warmest days. When a daring scholar ventured to ask why, the Major "mildly suggested that by learning to endure heat in this world, he would be better able to stand it in his future existence, if he did not walk the straight and narrow path." (Johnson and Harrison, p. 199)

Many reporters draw this conclusion about Major Obenchain's life: "Eminently fitted for a more lucrative profession, he lived a life of bitter and long self-denial, in doing that which he believed was his conscientious duty to do, to prepare young men for life" ("Major William Alexander Obenchain, 1841-1916," p. 23).

This conservative, rigid man, whose "favorite hobby [was] discipline," married an independent woman who called herself "high-tempered" and who proceeded to become an active and often radical spokesperson for women's rights (Ogden College school paper, *The Cardinal*, 1913; Letter to Josie, February 7, 1934). In one brief newspaper interview, a writer suggests that her husband was "as enthusiastic over her literary work as is the author herself," but it is easy to imagine considerable conflict between two people with such diametrical tempers and political views (Galloway).

Finances also seem to have been a source of difficulty in the marriage. In one letter to her sister from 1894, Hall mentions that she is "penniless" and waiting for her husband to return to pay off some small debts (August 18, 1894). (A passage in the same letter, however, suggests that she is not waiting all that eagerly: "No man about the house means much less trouble in housekeeping.") Many of her letters comment on money, how much she is earning, how she is "broke." Not until the publication of *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* in 1907 could Hall build a "long-desired and comfortable" home for her family with her royalties ("Eliza Calvert Hall," no pagination); in a letter about her move she never mentions her husband and says, "I shall be glad to get settled for I realize that I am too old to be dragged about from house to house any longer" (September 19, 1907). Writing to her sister Josie about a report of a new play of *Aunt Jane*, Lida described herself during the years she was writing the collection: "I feel flattered to be represented by a 'tall, stylish, handsome young woman,' but she ought to be a thin, small, tired, worn-out creature if she represents me as I was when 'Aunt Jane of Ky' was published" (November 7, 1929). The striking contrast between this description and the portrayal of the narrator in *Aunt Jane*, a serene, philosophical, and curious young woman with no apparent family connections or burdens, suggests that Hall took care to remove the "ugly colors" of her own life when she pieced together her stories.

The most revealing information about Hall's marriage comes from her daughter Cecil in a remarkable set of letters written while she nursed her mother in 1932. Furious about her mother's fretful response to her helplessness and claiming that she

hoped to write about her life, she asked her aunt for information to supplement her own view of her mother's "nature."

I look back on most of my childhood and the years at home, as a nightmare of restrictions and needless quarrelling [sic]. She hated Papa with all her might and never tried to conceal and I don't believe any other man in the world would have stood for the abuse she heaped on him. Or risen at all above it, as he did. In his notebooks left behind, I got the full extent of the tragedy, which started even before they married. She quarreled with him then—went into wild tempers and crossed him at many points. . . .

Don't misunderstand me. I fully realize all of her fine qualities and sympathize with all of her disappointments, but I cannot help from knowing that many of them she brought on herself and that where there should have been a happy home life, we were always ill at ease and conscious of immanent domestic storms. As a child I was made to believe that Papa was some sort of a monster. When I reached the age of reason and knew him, I wondered that he had not left her years ago. Everything he ever did and said was wrong in her opinion. I recall on her 58th birthday, fixing a special dinner. When we sat down to it, Papa [smiled] on her and told her how pretty she looked. . . . [S]he froze up and announced that it was certainly not due to anything he ever did for her. I shan't forget the hurt expression in his grey eyes. (November 14, 1932)

Margaret's reply is not extant, but apparently she questioned Cecil's motives, provoking this response from Cecil:

No, I didn't mean to use any facts unkindly, but simply to correct my own impressions. No, we all lived in an atmosphere of cruel hatred, hatred and uncalled for contempt Mother cherished for Papa. . . . She taunted him with having no mind, with being self-ish, with being senile. . . . When Papa died from that sad sickness, she was dry-eyed and remarked that she had nothing to be sorry for. . . . Miss Strong wrote me that Cousin Susie once remarked that the Major was gay and happy before he married Mother, but his eyes soon betrayed the tragedy he found himself a victim of. She also said that Mother was glad enough to have his proposal of marriage. What I wanted help from you about, was why she married him only to torture him with her contempt for him? She was gifted enough to make her fame and fortune as a writer in New York or elsewhere and she certainly was old enough to know that children were the natural results of marriage. She has said that she never loved or knew the emotion of physical love in her life. That we know, is repression which doctors nowadays can cure.

Miss Strong said doubtless Mother wanted to leave Papa, but

she lacked the courage to face public opinion. (December 14, 1932)

As Aunt Jane says, "There's a heap o' reasons for folks marrying," and we will never have the answer to Cecil's question of why her mother married her father (65). Those same psychoanalysts who "cure repression" would no doubt suggest that Lida was looking for a replacement for her absent father, for an older, settled, reliable man. Perhaps the anger and contempt she felt for the father she saw as weak and irresponsible eventually transferred to her husband. Although Hall focuses on the bright side of marriage in Jane's comments about Abram, the darker side is revealed in much of the rest of *Aunt Jane*. In "Mary Andrews' Dinner Party," Aunt Jane explores the consequences of an unhappy marriage, and her assessment of how marriage can "disappoint" may well reflect Hall's own experience. Cecil might have looked to her mother's story, where widowed Mary Andrews says of her miserly husband, "You know I married Harvey Andrews. But after I married him, I found that there wasn't any such man. I haven't any cause to cry, for the man I married ain't dead. He never was alive. . . ." And Jane concludes, "Mary ain't the only one, child, that's married a man, and then found out that there *wasn't any such man*" (102).

Cecil's memories provide a fascinating glimpse of the relationship between her parents, but her interpretation of her mother's character obviously presents a limited viewpoint. The woman Cecil describes is not the woman I encounter in the nearly 150 letters from Lida to her sisters, a woman who is generous and responsive—and only occasionally "high-tempered." Cecil was clearly feeling victimized by her invalid mother's complaints: later in the same letter, she accuses her mother of thwarting her musical career, of "never want[ing] any of us" and even of saying she tried to produce an abortion when she knew I was on the way." In later letters Cecil suggests that the "strain and fatigue" had gotten to her and writes affectionately and sympathetically of her mother. Upon Lida's death she wrote, "I must realize that nothing will ever be the same again, for want of Mother to share it" (Letter to Josephine, July 23, 1936). And Cecil's state of mind was always precarious; only a year after her mother's death she

apparently killed herself by jumping from a building in downtown Dallas.

Despite Cecil's claims that Lida did not want her children, all other evidence in her letters suggests her devotion to them. Looking for answers to why her mother stayed with her father, Cecil might have considered Milly Amos's comment from Hall's story, "The Marriage Problem in Goshen," from *The Land of Long Ago*. Jane narrates:

"I ricollect our Mite Society got to talkin' one day about husbands and wives leavin' each other, and whether it was ever right or lawful for married folks to part and marry again. Maria Petty says, says she, 'There's some things that every woman's called on to stand, and there's some things that no woman ought to stand.' And Sally Ann says, 'Yes, and as long as you women think you have to stand things, you'll have things to stand.' And Milly Amos says, 'A husband and a wife can part when there's no children, but,' says she, 'if they've had children, you might put the husband on one side o' the world and the wife on the other and they're husband and wife still, for there's the children holdin' 'em together.' I recollect everybody had a different opinion, and the longer we talked the further we got from any sort of agreement about it." (166-167)

One contemporaneous interviewer approvingly quoted Hall: "You must see my four children. . . . They are just the finest in all the world, and you may rest assured that I am prouder of them than of anything I have ever written, or expect to write" ("Aunt Jane of Kentucky," in *Weekly News Democrat*, 1910). The male interviewer's approval of such a comment reveals the pressure nineteenth century women felt to conform to what Barbara Welter called "the Cult of Domesticity," but while a few years ago I might have read such a comment as forced, since I have had my own baby I recognize that Hall may well have been sincere. Her letters express her grief at Margery's illness, her pride in her sons and her grandchildren, her fondness for her daughter-in-law Scotta, and her support of Cecil through a difficult separation from a husband who returned from World War I with shell-shock.

Despite her marriage, or perhaps because of it, Hall wrote a series of articles and essays on women's rights throughout the 1890's, publishing them in such journals as *Kate Field's Washington*, *The Women's Journal of Boston*, *The Woman's*

Tribune, and *Womankind*. She also wrote for the Woman's Page of the *New York Times*. Her most radical writing, her political essays, were published under her married name. Taken together, these witty, angry, and ironic essays outline a clear feminist agenda, and Hall offers her support to the "militant stage" of the "woman movement" ("A Point of Honor").³ Her most persistent claims are for suffrage and economic equality. The year before she wrote "Sally Ann's Experience," she published "The Evolution of Justice," in which she argued "that by the marriage ceremony women are bereft of their property rights." In *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, Hall would give the sarcastic voice of her essays to Sally Ann, as the following passage suggests:

Most men, honorable and upright in all other respects, will stand up at the alter, and piously and magnificently endow their brides with "all their worldly goods," and when the honeymoon is over, the woman who has been endowed with all her husband's goods, finds that she has to ask for every cent she spends, and if she doesn't ask she will never have a cent to spend. ("The Evolution of Justice," 9)

Often Hall's arguments remind a contemporary reader of more famous feminist texts. In "A Higher Physical Life for Women," for instance, she mocks authorities who speak for and about women, much as Virginia Woolf does in *A Room of One's Own*. After a series of quotes from such authorities, she says:

Nearly all the Reverends and the Right Reverends and the Very Reverends incline to the opinion that the physical health of women will be greatly benefited if she will only forswear her "rights," get up early, work till late, study the Ten Commandments, rock the cradle and be humble, very humble. (5)

Published in 1897, this essay overtly addresses the point more elliptically treated fictionally by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892):

Out of the hundreds of opinions only two men seem to have had acumen enough to discern the root-fact in the matter of woman's health, which is that woman's health, for the most part, is in the hands of men. (5)

An admirer of Gilman's work, Hall wrote in 1895 a laudatory essay calling her "the poet of the women's movement," in which

she also praises the work of Jewett and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and of unnamed "daring" writers who "have ventured on the burning question of a woman's right to the control of her own person after marriage" ("Charlotte Perkins Stetson," 1). In another essay, "So Fur From the Big Road," she explores the kind of isolation-within-marriage Gilman critiques and which would later be explored by Susan Glaspell in "A Jury of Her Peers":

In the days of her youth she was known as "a bright girl." John thought her so when he married her. But no one now calls her "a bright woman": for marriage has been to her but a gradual retirement into the lonely fastnesses of a purely domestic life, and she presents as real a case of arrested development as any you will find chronicled and marveled over in our scientific and medical journals. . . . My heart aches for her.

In "Woman Suffrage a Principal," she wrote, "We have taught women for centuries that their chief duty was to make themselves attractive to men, and they are going to act on this teaching, if they die for it." This ironic line anticipates Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905); although their social worlds and styles are quite different, both *Aunt Jane* and Wharton's novel consider the same subject, women's economic dependence and its effect upon marriage.

During the years her children were young, Hall struggled to find time to write. "Housekeeping and the care of children left me little time for writing, but night after night, when the children were asleep, I wrote my story on stray pieces of paper, using an old magazine as a portfolio and writing-desk" ("Why I Wrote 'Sally Ann's Experience,'" 165). In other comments she applied quilting metaphors to her writing process, claiming she worked piecemeal: "As she worked in her kitchen and about her house, she jotted down on scraps of paper, sometimes torn from sugar sacks or whatever was at hand, thoughts and verses which she would later use" ("Eliza Calvert Hall"). As her children grew up and she had more concentrated time, she turned from poetry and short essays to longer fiction. Her earliest and most successful fiction unites that domestic world with the activist messages of her journalism. "Sally Ann's Experience" first appeared in *Cosmopolitan Magazine* in July, 1898 and immediately made Hall famous; it was reprinted

many times, even as a separate book in 1910, with Hall's essay, "Why I Wrote 'Sally Ann's Experience,'" as a introduction. Her most productive years were when her children were nearly grown and when her husband was still alive, a fact which suggests that his support of her career might well have been significant. *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* appeared in 1907, followed by another collection of Aunt Jane stories, *The Land of Long Ago* (1909), a novel, *To Love and to Cherish* (1911), *A Book of Hand-Woven Coverlets* (1912), and *Clover and Blue Grass* (1916).

Although Hall's "hope" was "to do some good work before I die," she wrote little after her husband's death in 1916 (January 10, 1926). When her daughter Margery Winston had her first child in 1914, she went for an extended visit. In 1916, she moved permanently to Texas, where three of her children lived. Margery's health was precarious, and she was eventually diagnosed with tuberculosis and spent many months in a sanitarium. Hall turned her attention to child-rearing once again. To her mother she wrote, "I seem to have started life all over again, raising children and keeping house when I thought I was through with such work forever" (June 5, 1919).

Hall stayed with Margery until her daughter's death in 1923, and she stayed on to care for the children until 1925, when her son-in-law apparently remarried, and, as she experienced it, "took" the children from her. In many ways, Hall was the children's primary caregiver. Both were frequently ill and subject to respiratory problems like their mother's, and almost every letter during the period describes a recent illness and mentions the difficulties of nursing Margery and both children at once. When young Val was too ill to go to school, Hall taught him at home. Hall had to discourage his younger sister from calling her "Mama." While the letters suggest the split Hall felt between her work and childrearing, how she felt entrapped, they are also filled with affectionate and proud details about the children's latest activities. The following lines from a 1921 letter to Margaret characterize her tangled responses: "If Margery is ever well I shall have time to do a few things for myself but just now it is impossible. . . . I enjoy teaching [Little Val] whenever he allows me to do so. They are very interesting children but they can give more trouble than any two I ever saw. . . . I hear

the kids & I must stop. I am busier than I ever was in my life, but it's all right as long as I am well" (November 22, 1921).

Hall's dilemmas during this period of her life reveal the strong ties between generations of women which characterized the nineteenth century, a key theme in *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, and the conflicts such ties could produce, a theme largely absent from the collection. She found herself divided between being a daughter, a sister, a mother, and a writer. She eagerly asked for information about her sisters' and mother's lives and accomplishments: "I want to know how mother is and whether her needle-book took the premium" (October 19, 1919). When her mother died on Hall's birthday in 1920, she sent a telegram to her sisters, "Margery sick in bed cannot come love and sympathy," and wrote about how sorrowful she felt not to be there to help them. "Last night I slept very badly and once when I woke I thought, 'Perhaps Mother is dying tonight.' When I took the telegram up to Margery, she said: 'How strange. I was just thinking suppose Grandma should die on Mother's birthday'" (February 1, 1920). Such intra-generational telepathy occurs in the writing of many of Hall's contemporaries, particularly Jewett, Alcott, and Phelps. A few years later, as Margery worsened, she mournfully wrote to Margaret, "I wish we were near together so that we could help each other in times of sickness and trouble" (June 2, 1922). Hall saw herself and her life as a link between generations, as is suggested by her response to the receipt of a particularly fine batch of quilt pieces, a response which recalls Aunt Jane's symbolic use of quilts: Hall uses them to piece a doll quilt for her granddaughter but mentions to her sister how much she wishes their mother could have been alive to have them (February 26, 1927).

And yet some of Hall's work also explores the costs of such ties. One of her best late stories, "Old Mahogany," from *Clover and Blue Grass*, is narrated by an elderly woman who makes the daring act of selling off her inheritance, her family's mahogany furniture, wanting to be rid of the "'heap of associations'" connected with it" (96). "I tell you," she says to her friend, "as I told Mother, I'm somethin' more than a Member of the Family: I'm Myself, and I want to live my own life, and I've found out that if people live their own lives, they've got to get from under the shadow of their ancestors' tombstones" (97).

Hall's letters, however, are filled with regrets for furniture and flowers she left behind in Kentucky. Like *Aunt Jane*, they are rich with the domestic details that characterize women's lives. She quotes the children's funny lines and describes their "mischievous." She describes the houses she lives in and their furniture and how she keeps them clean; some of her best poems, unpublished but contained in her papers, are tributes to Ivory Snow, apparently written in response to a contest. She worries, long-distance, about "what to do about Mother's under garments" (October 6, 1918), is insulted when her mother chooses to wear a robe she gave her inside out because she thinks the fabric clashes with her house, and reminds Josie to be sure to put mothballs in her blankets. She describes making jam and preserving garden produce. Though she claims to be a miserable seamstress, she makes nightgowns for her sister and the quilt for her grand-daughter. But as "The Gardens of Memory," the last story in *Aunt Jane*, hints, she focuses on gardening, describing what is in fruit or bloom, asking her sisters to please send lily-of-the-valley roots and various seeds, especially pennyroyal, an herb both she and Jewett admired, counting the blossoms on the old rose she moved from Kentucky, expressing pleasure when she finally gets the pennyroyal established; she agreed with Jane that "'as long as there's a garden to be planted and looked after there's somthin' to live for'" (41). Although she cheerfully accepted the modern world, saying how much she liked her daughter's and grand-daughter's bobbed hair, her letters suggest that she inhabited a world whose activities and values did not differ markedly from those of Aunt Jane.

Hall's estrangement from her son-in-law and separation from Margery's children saddened her life. For a time she wrote often of how little she saw the children, but gradually she accepted a more restricted role in their lives and enjoyed their visits. Many nineteenth century texts, like Alcott's *Little Women* (1867) and Freeman's "The Selfishness of Amelia Lamkin" (1909), suggest that the self-sacrifice expected of women often shaded into martyrdom. Although I hear only occasional hints of such shading in Hall's letters, once again, Cecil presents a different angle on the story. She blames her mother for the estrangement and says: "And Sister's life was

III. Passing On Patterns: Aunt Jane's Literary Aunts

"The women work in the field, hoeing the cotton, gathering it when it is ripe, picking it, carding it, and spinning it. The sheep must be sheared and the wool picked, washed, carded, and spun. Then they must dig roots, collect the barks of different trees, set the "blue-pot" and make the dyes according to ancestral methods. When all this drudgery is finished, the mountain woman seats herself at the loom; her bodily weariness falls from her like a garment; she is no longer a tired drudge, she is an artist. . ." (*Coverlets*, 45-46)

Asserting that young women should honor the legacy of the women's rights activists, "A Point of Honor" reveals its author's political agendas and associations. Yet Hall's choice to use her grandmother's name when she wrote her fiction and her creation of Aunt Jane suggest equally important legacies from the ordinary women who dedicate their lives to piecing the social fabric, women who could also be "free-spoken" and "strong-minded." In their quilts and coverlets and jams and gardens, such women preserve a woman's heritage of creativity. Like contemporary women's historians, Hall finds in such domestic arts a way to read women's lives; they are, as Jane says, "albums and diaries" in which women inscribed social history. Like the contemporary film "Hearts and Hands," which explores how nineteenth century women used their needles, their domestic arts, to enter public discourse and effect social change, Hall's work joins the public and private worlds. Women like Sally Ann and Jane offer younger women a transformative way of seeing, as the unnamed narrator makes clear at the end of "Aunt Jane's Album":

I looked again at the heap of quilts. An hour ago they had been patchwork, and nothing more. But now! The old woman's words had wrought a transformation in the homely mass of calico and silk and worsted. Patchwork? Ah, no! It was memory, imagination, history, biography, joy, sorrow, philosophy, religion, romance, realism, life, love, and death; and over all, like a halo, the love of the artist for his work and the soul's longing for earthly immortality. (38)

The narrator's abstract, elevated diction often seems strained in contrast with Jane's concrete metaphors, but her

role in the collection is crucial. Much like Jewett's narrator in *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), published at about the time Hall began to write fiction, she represents the next generation of "new women," educated women who learn to respect the wisdom and spirit of women in touch with folk life. Hall does not focus on the narrator's insights, as Jewett does, but lets Jane tell her own stories, in her own language, and quote her friends directly. Yet by framing Jane's stories and sometimes interpreting their significance, the narrator inherits and passes them on. Through her, Jane leaves "somethin' behind that'll last after [she's] dead and gone."

While Jane believes no one will remember her for the work she did raising her family, Hall appreciates that she leaves something behind by influencing the next generation: the narrator is not just a transcriber of Jane's stories but affected, even changed, by them. When she says near the end of the collection that "an old Garden is like an old life" (120-21) and explores Jane's for "memories," she demonstrates that she has learned to see the world as Jane does. And while her language is proper, without the rich flavor of Jane's, we sometimes hear echoes of Jane, as, for instance, when she describes Jane's flower border as running around her garden "like costly embroidery on the hem of a homespun garment" (123). Thus the form of the collection reenacts one of its major themes, the importance of heritage. In the narrator's eagerness to hear Jane's stories, her respect for Jane and her values, the powerful heritage of women's culture is revealed. Hall's exploration of the meaningful connections between generations of women grew naturally from her own life; in *Aunt Jane* and all her other work, she defined such legacies as central to her understanding of both identity and art:

The mountain woman . . . inherits her patterns. In the old days every mother taught her daughter to weave and every family had its own particular patterns; but lest the precious knowledge might be lost; the patterns were indicated by marks and figures on paper, and these "drafts," as the weavers call them, passed from hand to hand as long as the paper lasted. (*Coverlets*, 119-120)

Hall also inherited patterns from writers who came before her, precious knowledge she passed on herself.⁴

Aunt Jane's inheritance begins with the writers Mary Kelley has called "domestic sentimentalists," writers who asserted the superiority of women's culture and sought to replace America's "rampant individualism" by demonstrating "the mutual dependence of human beings" (437). The domestic sentimentalists passed on their concerns to the next generation of women writers, the regionalists, recently discussed by Marjorie Pryse and Judith Fetterley in *American Women Regionalists*; although Pryse and Fetterley do not mention Hall, she is a member of this group. Distinct from "local color literature," which presents regional behaviors as oddities and assumes a detached superiority, regionalist fiction presents "regional experience from within, so as to engage the reader's sympathy and identification" (xii). Its practitioners employ empathy as a mode of understanding and explanation. Identity, they suggest, is realized through networks of interactions:

Through interactions with other women, and with their stories, often enfolded as narratives-within-narratives, female protagonists and narrators in regionalist fiction often develop further within the context of a particular community of women located in a specific place, and define identity as collective, connected, and collaborative. (xvi)

In Jane's stories, with their frequent quotations of the insights of other women, are embedded the stories of many other women; the narrator inherits a communal history. And Jane's quilts and gardens also read as narratives-within-narratives, stitching together the lives of Milly and Sally Ann and Maria and Jane. The mutual support of the women in the Mite Society and their many activities emphasize the importance of communal life, yet Jane's friends do not merge into each other. Each is as distinctive as her quilt stitches. Independence and originality are as important to Hall's conception of identity as collectivity. "You can give the same kind o' pieces to two persons, and one'll make a 'nine-patch' and one'll make a 'wild-goose chase,' and there'll be two quilts . . . jest as different as they can be" (34).

From her regionalist predecessors Hall also received encouragement to see ordinary women as artists. When she claims that when "the mountain woman seats herself at the loom, . . . she is an artist" (*Coverlets*, 46), she echoes most particularly Freeman, who describes housekeeper Sarah Penn from "The

Revolt of Mother" (1891) as "like an artist so perfect that he has apparently no art" and Louisa Ellis from "A New England Nun" (1891) as having "almost the enthusiasm of an artist over the mere order and cleanliness of her solitary home." Throughout her fiction, Freeman explores attitudes towards women's work and art, suggesting that knitting, sewing, gardening, and writing sentimental consolation poetry are essential to her characters' self-conceptions, and these acts become ways for Freeman to explore creativity more broadly. Both Harriet Beecher Stowe and Jewett also devoted considerable attention to the domestic arts.

Yet Hall's sustained treatment of quilting as an art form and as a mode of expression may owe a debt to a writer not usually considered a regionalist, Rebecca Harding Davis, whose "Life in the Iron Mills" (1861) explores the ways in which a poorly educated factory worker struggles to express his feelings and needs through folk art: he carves a statue, the *Korl Woman*, from materials at hand, the scraps from the factory in which he works. Given her interest in the arts of her region, Hall likely knew the work of Davis, a West Virginian. Hall's coverlet book begins with an epigram from J. H. Dillard that could also have served Davis's work: "It is a pity that when we speak of art, the thought should be of something quite remote from the life of all the people. . . . The word *art* ought to carry as common and universal a meaning as the words *life* and *love*."

While Pryse and Fetterley focus on women writers and relationships among women, regionalist writers—Mary Wilkins Freeman, Kate Chopin, and Rose Terry Cooke, for instance—also explore power dynamics between women and men, particularly within marriage. In works like Cooke's "Providence Wheeler's Controversy with God" (1877) and "Mrs. Flint's Experience" (1880), Freeman's "The Revolt of Mother" (1891), and Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), male dominance and women's economic dependence within marriage are key themes, as they were in the women's rights literature Hall knew so well. Country women in Freeman and Jewett stories defy male authority, as does Sally Ann, and mock ministers, as Jane does when she comments on Parson Page's ineffectualness; and Jane's notion that a woman, Sally Ann, could take the Lord Jesus's place is a "sacrilege" many other regionalists

shared. Yet despite some pointed criticisms of male behavior, Jane presents men sympathetically, and men have a prominent place in her stories. The community of Goshen resembles those in the New England novels of Harriet Beecher Stowe, novels like *Oldtown Folks* (1869), where communal networks are woven of both women and men.

As Stowe did in her work, Hall presents a variety of marriages in *Aunt Jane* and in her later collection, *The Land of Long Ago* (1909), where "The Marriage Problem in Goshen" explores its title subject and "Mary Crawford's Chart" recounts a mutually supportive marriage much like Jane's and Abram's. As the title of Hall's one novel, *To Love and To Cherish* (1911), suggests, marriage is also its major theme. Apparently unmarried herself Sally Ann speaks directly—and to men—about subjects writers like Freeman and Cooke dealt with more obliquely in their plots, the emotional and economic cruelty and deprivation in many Goshen marriages, her sermon only ended by a characteristic Hall irony when Parson Page suggests everyone sing "Blessed Be the Tie that Binds." While Sally Ann "reproves" the men, Jane suggests that women too readily accept victimization and could change male behavior: "You see, I never was any hand at 'submittin' myself to my husband, like some women. I've often wondered if Abram wouldn't 'a' been jest like Silas Petty if I'd been like Maria" (12). In fact, Sally Ann's sermon does seem to change the husbands, as Sarah Penn's assertiveness eventually seems to change her husband's attitudes in Freeman's "The Revolt of Mother." Jane explores husband's assumptions and women's work in "Sweet Day of Rest," the mutual stubbornness of a husband and wife who put abstract doctrines above each others' needs in "The Baptizing at Kittle Creek," and the ambiguities of choosing a marriage partner and women's economic powerlessness in "Mary Andrews' Dinner-Party." Throughout *Aunt Jane*, she makes insightful comments about what husbands and wives need from each other. "It does a husband and wife a heap o' good to be proud of each other. . ." she says of Sam Lawson's response when Sarah Jane wins the premium on her quilt (31). And those insights grow from her own experience, for Jane had earlier declared how proud she felt of Abram for his speech about the new organ.

Like other regionalists, Hall presents her readers with many different looks at marriage, some political, some social, some emotional, some psychological. Her richest portrayal of marriage occurs piecemeal throughout *Aunt Jane* in her anecdotes about the Amos's marriage and about Jane's life with Abram. *Aunt Jane* focuses on the comic give-and-take in the Amos's marriage, describing, for instance, how they tease each other and make biscuits together, but a later story from *The Land of Long Ago* presents a darker view: though "The Reformation of Sam Amos" does indeed end with his reformation, Sam's drinking is so severe that Milly has to send the children away, and the story hints at domestic violence. But there are no such hints in the altogether model marriage of Jane and Abram; the two share the premium. Her portrayal of such a positive union is unusual in regionalist literature.

Perhaps in Jane's marriage Hall attempted to revise her own. Like Austin and Cather who followed her, instead of simply critiquing marriage, she tried to imagine what a mutually satisfying relationship would provide its partners. Abram and Jane are indeed proud of each other, support each other, speak up for each other, help each other. They share the laughter Jane finds so healing. Abram laughs at what the neighbors will think when he stops plowing to help Jane save the Johnny-jump-ups, but in a perfect symbol of their marriage, both husband and wife manage to get their fields plowed and planted, their needs met. It "wasn't Abram's way nor my way;" Jane says, "it was jest *our way*" (76). Jane tries to "please" Abram by joining his church; he tries to please her by buying her calico dresses. They share their feelings with each other, compromise, and pay attention to the "little things" Jane says can be so important (68). Abram knows enough to "give [his wife] the rein" and Jane laughs at Maria Taylor's advice: "Jest break a man in at the start, and you won't have no trouble afterwards" (45, 75). Both contribute to the marriage's success, but given the portrayal of most of the other husbands of Goshen, one can't help but feel that Abram's "better understandin' o' women's ways" is what makes the difference (68).

Many of Jane's closest literary kin are sharp-tongued widows or spinsters, like Jewett's Mrs. Todd, the literary niece of Stew's Aunt Roby, a spinster from *The Pearl of Orr's Island* (1861),

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both of whom share Jane's folk wisdom and vernacular speech. But the storyteller who most resembles Jane is Samantha Allen, another happily married social critic with an "ironical" point of view, created by Marietta Holley, a humorist and suffragist. Like the regionalists, nineteenth century American humorists had depended on the vernacular, sometimes mocking characters who used it but as often exploring their storytellers' creative energies and the liberating possibilities of language. Hall's portrayal of comic communal events and her characters' defiance, concrete, extravagant imagery, and verbal conceits may be influenced by earlier southern writers, the southwestern humorists, who often used frame narrators as well.⁵ Indeed Hall's work can be read as a feminist response to Tennessean George Washington Harris, whose *Sut Lovingood's Yarns* (1867), filled with verbal highjinks and grotesque humor, was a favorite of Faulkner's. "Aunt Jane's Album" legitimizes quilting, the art form mocked in Harris's best known story, "Mrs. Yardley's Quilting," and Hall creates gentle male characters who uphold community, in contrast to Sut Lovingood's anti-social destructiveness.

In southwestern humor, women were often the butt of the comedy, their values mocked. Holley and Hall responded by creating women characters who "laugh fit to kill" at men, women who respect themselves and defend other women but who can laugh at themselves (Hall, 25). Hall's storytelling often had a political slant: she says at the beginning of "Why I Wrote 'Sally Ann's Experience,'" "my purpose was to show the iniquity of the old common law of England in regard to the property rights of married women" (*Sally Ann's Experience*, v). Like Holley, Hall recognized that humor was an effective political tool, particularly when the speaker was not overtly a women's rights activist but a happily married country woman and mother.

Like Hall, Holley was a suffragist who devoted her career to challenging stereotypes about women's sphere. Beginning with *My Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's* in 1873 and ending with *Samantha on the Woman Question* in 1914, her series of books narrated by the outspoken and "strong-minded" Samantha Allen were wildly popular. Holley created a spunky, sage, and self-respecting middle-aged country woman who "frees her mind" upon any occasion and whose major theme is "women's rites."

The unmarried Holley self-consciously wrote under the pseudonym "Josiah Allen's Wife" in order to avoid the condemnation of the "strong-minded" Hall satirized, and her best books focus on Samantha's marriage to a husband who mouths the platitudes of male superiority but cannot act upon them, a man more like Sam Amos than like Abram.

Sally Ann in particular seems influenced by the free-spoken Samantha: when told, for instance, that "it is a shame for a woman to speak in public," Samantha says, "How dare any man to try to tie up a woman's tongue..." (388-89). "Sweet Day of Rest" could be a retelling of a chapter from *MY Opinions and Betsey Bobbet's*, "A Day of Troubles," a satirical look at the "easy life" of the housewife, as summed up by Samantha: "well doth the poet say—'That a woman never gets her work done up, for she don't'" (59). Both Hall and Holley demonstrated that women who lived "traditional" lives could be radical messengers for women's rights. Both attempted to show women how they could take control and change their lives; Jane's and Sally's Ann's analyses of how women sometimes "submit" to their husband's dominance—"I've noticed that whenever a woman's willin' to be imposed upon, there's always a man standin' 'round ready to do the imposin'" —recalls Samantha's irritation with Betsey Bobbet for accepting the ideology of women's sphere (Hall, 27). And Holley also wrote a quilting story, "Mrs. Jones's Quilting" (1887).

Finally, unlike the domestic feminists who presented covert subversive messages, both Hall and Holley were as assertive and direct as their heroines. Praising Holley's work, Walter Blair called it "propaganda . . . brilliantly handled" (238). President Theodore Roosevelt made a similar comment about "Sally Ann's Experience," when in a speech he recommended the story for use "as a tract in all families where the men folks tend to selfish or thoughtless or overbearing disregard of the rights of their womenkind" (quoted in introduction to *Sally Ann's Experience*). The success of "Sally Ann's Experience," reprinted dozens of times, and Holley's many novels suggests that late nineteenth century readers were eager for works where "the feminist movement, which for decades had been a stand-by for comic attacks, . . . became the policy vigorously supported" (Blair, 238). Perhaps Hall, writing "Sally Ann's

Experience" in 1898, read Kate Sanborn's essay, "Are Women Witty?", published in the same year, in which Sanborn ironically challenges accusations that women have no sense of humor. About Holley, Sanborn says:

Her Samantha Allen and Betsey Bobbet convulsed the continent. She is constantly solicited for humorous articles and more funny books, until she is well-nigh killed. Men, I mean publishers, find that women's wit puts much money in their pockets. As they rattle the gold and caressingly count the bills from twentieth editions, do they still think of women as sad, crushed, sentimental, hero-adoring geese who can't see the humorous side? (324)⁶

IV. *Aunt Jane of Kentucky:* An Unforgettable Voice

"Voices and faces is alike; there's some that you can't remember, and there's some you can't forgit. I've seen a heap o' people and heard a heap o' voices, but Miss Penelope's face was different from all the rest, and so was her voice." (28) Aunt Jane

Aunt Jane of Kentucky is about the value of memories and legacies. Jane remembers her friends by their quilt stitches, the fabric of their dresses, the kinds of dinners they cooked, the plants they grew, and their voices. Like Miss Penelope's, Aunt Jane's voice is one you can't forget. Her stories are about the importance of speaking your mind; and in them she offers metaphors for self-expression. As Jewett's Mrs. Todd uses herbal and other natural comparisons to convey her understanding of human character, Jane develops a language seasoned with domestic imagery, conveying the significance of everyday life. Focusing on character and relationships rather than on plot, Jane's stories don't really ramble but return again and again to key heritage, memory, storytelling, nature, women's friendships, and marriage.

Aunt Jane is a tribute to voice, not just Jane's but those of her friends. Hall populates Goshen with women and men who stand up for themselves and for others. The stories they tell about each other and what happens in their town create the reader's sense of a community, its quarrels, events, and scan-

dals, its differences about behavior and values, and its expressions of affection and acceptance; as Sam's niece says, the stories tell "a pretty good history" (65). By so often quoting her friends directly, Jane gives them life through their language. Her first story, with its recounting of Sally Ann's sermon and her "gift of tongues," sets the theme: as she tells the sad stories of the wives of Goshen, Sally Ann challenges masculine perceptions and behavior, recounts social history, and "gives her experience" of the world.

Perhaps most significantly, Sally Ann makes Jane laugh. Jane, who believes a laugh helped heal Milly Amos, recognizes the value of laughter. Humor lies less in incident than in storytelling, in how a character perceives what happened: "We all had to laugh," says Jane, "at the way Milly told" her story (43). Though Jane may not think Milly's strong voice is as beautiful as Penelope's, she remembers what Milly says: that she wants a "hot biscuit carved on her tombstone" (80), that she asked Sam not to let Uncle Jim sing at her funeral or she'd rise up out of her coffin, that she said "that the only thing that'd make Sam enjoy ridin' more'n he did was for somebody to put up lookin'-glasses so he could see himself all along the road" (85), that she could make fun of herself and make her grumpy husband laugh by asking him to crown her "Queen o' Love and Beauty" (87-88). Milly is a good match for Sam, who "always would have his say" (47). And though Abram is "close-mouthed," he says enough for Jane to quote him often, particularly when he supports or conspires with the women of the community or responds to Jane's feelings and needs.

Filled with storytellers, Jane's stories are pieced together like her quilts. Or perhaps another of Jane's metaphors better conveys her art: her stories are made up of a choir of voices, some cracked, some angry, some beautiful. Art becomes a communal activity; self-expression takes place within a communal frame. Yet the voices are individualized, unique, and Jane sings the lead. As Sally Ann tells *her* experience by telling the stories of other women, so do Jane's stories convey her experience, her wisdom and understanding, her values and attitudes. And her sense of humor; by the end of *Aunt Jane*, we realize that we all had to laugh at how Jane told her story. Her "whole life" may have been "sewed up" in her quilts and

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recorded in her garden, but her stories also reveal the patterns of her life. In "Aunt Jane's Album," the narrator sees the quilts and the stories joining to tell Jane's "life-history" (38).

Jane's language is grounded in her life. Her imagery is concrete and often humorous, as when she describes Uncle Jim's voice: "It used to make me think of an old rickety house with the blinds flappin' in the wind" (17). She uses pithy sayings to assess human behavior. Commenting on how despite a long discussion in the Mite Society no one took responsibility for warning poor Milly Baker, she says, "But everybody's business is nobody's business" (55). Jane's most effective language borrows imagery from the domestic world, particularly quilting. Through using such imagery Hall suggests that domestic arts offer women a vocabulary and an opportunity to create a philosophy of life, a way of understanding the world.

Although Hall's work has been overlooked, her exploration of quilting metaphors anticipates what Elaine Hedges has called "a widespread and peculiarly interesting development in contemporary feminist thinking": the "rediscovery and celebration of women's traditional textile work—the domestic arts of spinning and weaving, sewing and quilting" (338). Perhaps inspired both by the central symbol of a quilt in a story which quickly became a feminist classic in the 1970's, Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of Her Peers" (1917) and by Walker's analysis of the creativity embodied in quilts in "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1974), women's literary historians borrowed the language of quilting to develop a feminist discourse, to speculate about women's distinctive literary styles, and to explore women's culture and values. Recent examples include *Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society*, by Elaine Hedges, Pat Ferrero, and Julie Silber, book and film; Hedges's essay, "The Needle or the Pen: The Literary Rediscovery of Women's Textile Work"; the final chapter of Elaine Showalter's *Sister's Choice*, entitled "Common Threads," an expansion of her earlier essay, "Piecing and Writing"; Houston and Charlotte Baker's "Patches, Quilts and Community in Alice Walker's 'Everyday Use'"; and Ozzie Mayers's "The Power of the Pin: Sewing as an Act of Rootedness in American Literature." Although none of these critics discusses Hall, Jane should occupy the center of the literary quilt they are piecing.

As these critics demonstrate, many writers before Hall—Stowe, Alcott, Freeman, and Jewett, among others—used quilts symbolically. Like Jane, who calls her quilts "albums and di'ries," some writers even presented them as texts to be read, as did the anonymous author of "The Patchwork Quilt" from the *Lowell Offering* (1845), who saw her quilt as a "bound volume of hieroglyphics" that revealed the "passages of [her] life" (150). Many writers presented quilts as personal and communal histories, as Jane does when she remembers her friends by their quilt stitches and their dress remnants. The Afro-American quilt-maker Harriet Powers, Hall's contemporary, also linked storytelling to quilting in her famous "Bible Quilt." Hall's unique contribution was her detailed exploration of quilts as offering not just symbols of women's lives but modes of understanding them, interpretations of life's meanings: "they ain't no better sermon . . . than a patchwork quilt" (34). Jane's quilts are not simply aesthetic creations; working on them has prompted deep thought and provided her with conceptual patterns, with an epistemology, with a vocabulary to express her ideas, her values, and her experience. "[H]ow much piecin' a quilt's like livin' a life" (34). Although she sounds a bit like Parson Page, the narrator is not reaching when she sees the quilts as meditations on "memory, imagination, history, biography, joy, sorrow, philosophy, religion, romance, realism, life, love, and death; and . . . the love of the artist for his work" (38).

Like Sally Ann, Jane challenges men for the control of language; in her "sermon" on predestination and free will, she takes Parson Page's abstractions and makes them "a heap plainer to folks than parson's makin' it with his big words" (34).

"You see, you start out with jest so much caliker; you don't go to the store and pick it out and buy it, but the neighbors will give you a piece her and a piece there, and you'll have a piece left every time you cut out a dress, and you take jest what happens to come. And that's like predestination. But when it comes to the cuttin' out, why, you're free to choose your own pattern. You can give the same kind o' pieces to two persons, and one'll make a 'ninepatch' and one'll make a 'wild-goose chase,' and there'll be two quilts made out o' the same kind o' pieces, and jest as different as they can be. And that is jest the way with livin'. The Lord sends us the pieces, but we can cut 'em out and put 'em together pretty much to suit ourselves, and there's a heap more in the cuttin' out and the sewin' than there is in the caliker." (34)

Within the limitations of the pieces given and the patterns passed on, Jane ingeniously discovers freedom, power, and creativity. Through appropriating religious language, Jane also claims spirituality, the same quality Walker would emphasize in black women's art some 70 years later. Discussing another fictional quilt-maker, Mehitabel, from Dorothy Canfield's "The Bedquilt" (1915), theologian Mary Daly describes her creative process as "a paradigm of the 'Musing,' which [Daly] urges is women's religio-epistemological mode" (Hedges, 358).

Jane's sermon offers an implicit analysis of the paradoxes historians have explored in nineteenth century women's lives. Do we focus on how women were constrained by lack of access to equal education and opportunity, on cultural deprivation, as, for instance, Virginia Woolf did in *A Room of One's Own* or Hall did in her feminist essays—that is, emphasize predestination? Or do we emphasize the revolutionary possibilities in the values and creativity many women claimed were inherent in women's culture—that is, elaborate on free will? The woman Hall so admired, Gilman, described proponents of these views as "Humanist Feminists" and "Female Feminists" and suggested that the reconciliation of "personhood" with "womanhood" was the ideological dilemma of feminist thought. As *Aunt Jane* can be read as final tribute to the women's culture most historians have seen as ending around the turn of the century, so can the passage can be read as a fundamentally conservative expression of the belief of the domestic sentimentalists that although a woman's life was made up of accommodation and negotiation, women had considerable power and freedom within the limitations of their "sphere." Rose Terry Cooke had made a similar argument in "Rootbound" (1885) by using a different metaphor from domestic culture, one Hall would have appreciated, the belief that some flowers will not bloom unless rootbound. But though Hall may accept the given pieces and the patterns of the past, her conception of a woman's religious system is radical and empowering in its assertion of balance: Jane acknowledges the restrictions but asserts that women *do* have the pieces they need to express their creative impulses, to design and interpret their lives. And "when it comes to puttin' the pieces [of your life] together, there's another time when we're free" to pick out the colors that expresses how we "look

at things right and think about 'em right'" (35). As Jane reconciled predestination and free will, Hall reconciled personhood with womanhood, providing a model conceptualization for feminist historians: explore the pieces women were given but focus on what women created out of those pieces. Discover shared patterns among women but recognize individual choices and differences in materials women had to work with. Look for how women felt about their own lives and work. Question and break down dichotomies. Balance the lights with the darks; join the pretty with the ugly.

Hall looked for that balance throughout *Aunt Jane*, in her portrayal of marriage, her connections between the past and the present, her understanding of her characters' needs, and in her stylistic balance of lights and darks, lyricism and irony, sentimentality and social critique. Pieced together of many stories, "Aunt Jane's Album" addresses the most difficult balancing act for nineteenth century women, reconciling the needs of self with those of others. Much of the story is devoted to Jane's comments about personal accomplishment, the individual creative spirit, and the importance of her work; she is proud of her talents and her premiums. Yet in the story-within-a-story about the conspiracy between Jane, Sally Ann, Milly and Abram to help Sarah Jane win the premium for her quilt, Jane gives up her premium and shares her pride with Sarah Jane—and her husband. Self-sacrifice often turns into martyrdom in nineteenth century women's literature, but by showing that Jane can fulfill her own needs for self-expression and success and still nurture others, Hall offers a portrait of psychic health and self-esteem: "There was a look of unspeakable satisfaction on her face—the look of the creator who sees his completed work and pronounces it good" (36). Jane does the work that keeps society going, work that perishes with the using, work for others, but she also does what she wants and needs to do for herself. Once again, piecing a quilt is like living a life, for quilts combine the individual vision of the artist who pieces the top with the shared talents of the many women who customarily do the stitching.

Hall wrote *Aunt Jane* at a time when many women saw "sewing—as material reality and also as a powerful symbolic marker of their cultural condition, their restricted domestic

role— . . . as both literal and psychological deterrent to ambition and achievement (Hedges, 340). When told, for instance, that it is “proper that little girls should learn to sew and cook,” the artist heroine of one of the most powerful feminist novels of the century, Phelps’s *The Story of Avis* (1877), says “It makes a crawling down my back to sew. But the crawling comes from hating: the more I hate, the more I crawl!” (26, 27). Sewing and other domestic activities were signs of women’s oppression. Avis’s desperate crawling to escape a confining domestic role recalls Gilman’s “Yellow Wallpaper” narrator, who goes crazy crawling around the nursery in which she is trapped. Feminists particularly critiqued the Victorian craze of “crazy quilts,” often made by idle, privileged women from remnants of expensive fabrics like silks and velvets, a view Hall obviously shared. Yet Hall offered yet another synthetic vision in her treatment of quilting and domestic arts, for in her work and her life she bridged the worlds of the traditional and radical woman, suggesting that feminists did not have to reject the activities of their mothers, that indeed such activities offered transformative opportunities and ways of thinking.⁷

Linking the writing of nineteenth and twentieth century women writers, Hall’s work suggests that “new women” did continue to think back through their mothers, as Woolf said, and about their mothers’ art. Within a few years of the publication of *Aunt Jane of Kentucky*, the next generation of women writers would carry on the literary quilting bee. The best known examples are Dorothy Canfield’s “The Bedquilt” (1915), which ends with a line that might have been borrowed from Hall, and Susan Glaspell’s “A Jury of Her Peers” (1917), but there are many others. Two of the most significant writers of the next generation, Mary Austin and Willa Cather, would also devote considerable attention to domestic art.

So while Hall’s roots may be regionalist, she also belongs to a choir of turn-of-the-century voices who were, Elizabeth Ammons argues in *Conflicting Stories*, empowered by political activism, writers who were progressive, even radical. Although most of the writers Ammons discusses would be considered modernist while Hall often appears nostalgic for a traditional past, Hall does share their concerns. They are connected, says Ammons by a “network of recurrent, complicated themes

which . . . finally interlock in their shared focus on issues of power: the will to break silence . . . by exposing the connections among institutionalized violence, the sexual exploitation of women, and female muteness; preoccupation with the figure of the woman artist; the need to find union and reunion with the world of one’s mother. . . (5). Hall’s work can be read as an attempt to resolve some of the dilemmas faced by writers like Jewett, Gilman, Cather, Wharton, and Austin, who Ammons says “intended to claim for themselves the territory of Art”:

Paradoxically, this claim both liberated and confined women. On the one hand, they found themselves free from many of the limiting definitions that had constricted women aspiring to be artists in earlier periods. . . . On the other hand, turn-of-the-century women writers found themselves, often in deep, subtle ways, emotionally stranded between worlds. . . . They were full members neither of their mothers’ world, at the one extreme, nor of that of the privileged white male artist, at the other. Further, the ways of living and types of writing associated with “art” had by and large been shaped by men; they were not necessarily compatible with the kinds of lives and types of stories that women writers wished to express. (10)

By focusing on the legacy of her mother’s generation and by joining domestic art with telling stories about women’s lives, Hall managed to create a unique voice, a vocabulary, and a form which perfectly expresses her content, to link worlds rather than to be stranded between them. Like many women writers who followed her, from Cather and Canfield to Alice Walker and Paule Marshall, as she claimed opportunities and a public voice for herself, she paid tribute to the self-expression and creativity of the domestic world. Her treatment of women’s art anticipates Alice Walker’s important discovery of the roots of her own creativity in the quilt of an anonymous black woman (probably Harriet Powers) and in her mother’s garden, and Walker’s tribute to her mother seems an apt tribute to Hall’s work as well:

Her face, as she prepared the Art that is her gift, is a legacy of respect she leaves to me, for all that illuminates and cherishes life. She has handed down respect for the possibilities—and the will to grasp them. (241–42)

As a quilt-maker and a literary historian, I have learned from Hall how to read and interpret the symbolic meanings of quilt

patterns and women's lives. I am happy that this new edition will bring her fiction to a new generation of readers, that her work will not perish, that she and Aunt Jane can leave something behind and not be forgotten.

"I've seen folks piece and piece, but when it comes to puttin' the blocks together and quiltin' and linin' it, they'd give out, and that's like folks that do a little here and a little there, but their lives ain't of much use after all, any more'n a lot o' loose pieces o' patchwork. And then while you're livin' your life, it looks pretty much like a jumble o' quilt pieces before they're put together; but when you git through with it, or pretty nigh through, as I am now, you'll see the use and purpose of everything in it. Everything'll be in its right place jest like the squares in this "four-patch," and one piece may be pretty and another ugly, but it all looks right when you see it finished and joined together."
(35) Aunt Jane

Notes

1. Page numbers refer to this edition.
2. All of the letters quoted in this introduction are contained in the Calvert-Obenchain-Younglove Collection, Kentucky Library, Western Kentucky University. I would especially like to thank special collections librarian Nancy Baird for her considerable help.
3. I read copies of Hall's essays and clippings about her life from the Calvert-Obenchain-Younglove collection at Kentucky Library. Full bibliographic information was not always available.
4. Hall also recognized that passing on patterns could have its costs. "Mary Crawford's Chart," from *Clover and Blue Grass*, is about a woman who buys a "scientific" chart to help her make clothing patterns. With her "knowledge of mathematics" and "quick brain," she figures out "the system of the chart, . . . flushed with excitement and pleasure" (41). Like most Hall heroines, she is generous to her friends and happily lends them the chart. But unlike Mary, they are weak at math, and so they need her help. Eventually overburdened by her friends' demands and her efforts to find time for her own work, she collapses. Recognizing she can never say no, her kind-hearted husband burns the "blamed chart" and tells his wife, "What's mine's yours, Mary. . . . Get a seamstress to do your sewing" (90).
5. Another woman writer influenced by her southern humorist predecessors was Eudora Welty, whose synthesis of lyricism and irony, use of the vernacular, and treatment of southern small town life greatly resemble Hall's.
6. For a discussion of nineteenth century women's humor, see Nancy A. Walker, *A Very Serious Thing: Women's Humor and American Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Walker discusses Holley but not Hall. For more information on Holley, see my essay, "Wimmen is my theme, and also Josiah": The Forgotten Humor of Marietta Holley" (*American Transcendental Quarterly*, Summer/Fall, 1980, p. 283-96) or a collection of Holley's works, edited and with an introduction by Jane Curry, *Samantha Wrestles the Woman Question* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983).
7. For a fuller analysis of the attitudes of women's rights activists to sewing, see *Hearts and Hands* or "The Needle or the Pen."

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