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## *Pieces: Artist and Audience In Three Mary Wilkins Freeman Stories*

by NORMA JOHNSEN

EVEN AT THE end of the nineteenth century, most apparel was homesewn, and all girls were taught needle skills. Consequently, writing women often clothed their literary visions in the woven materials that covered furniture, adorned beds, and dressed bodies, rather than borrowing the whales, forests, and ledgers that inspired men. As young Mary Wilkins watched dressmakers and reluctantly stitched her own patchwork, she imbibed knowledge. When she began writing, those childhood images of women sewing naturally found their way into her work. After all, etymologies of word pairs like “textile”/“text” and “fabric”/“fabrication” suggest that constructing with cloth is not so different from constructing with words. Thus when Wilkins writes about relationships between artist, subject matter, and audience, it is not surprising that the material of her fiction is often material—patchwork, cloth, and clothing.

Derived from common female experience, references to fabric and sewing in nineteenth-century literature and art constitute the “shared recognitions” upon which, as Annette Kolodny points out, “symbolic representations depend.”<sup>1</sup> And, indeed, Kolodny and others have noted the prevalence of symbolism and imagery involving cloth, stitching, weaving, embroidery, and quilting in women’s literature.<sup>2</sup> That such imagery constitutes an exclusively female trademark was noted as early as 1847 by Harriet Martineau, who guessed that *Jane Eyre*’s author was a woman based on her certainty that a man could never have described Grace Poole sewing curtain rings on drapes.<sup>3</sup> This identification of cloth and sewing with women—although resisted only a generation ago by tomboys—has led to a new celebration of women’s needlework. These arts are now often seen as metaphors for women’s culture of the past.<sup>4</sup>

If twentieth-century readers perceive sewing as a signifier of women’s culture, nineteenth-century references to that culture are sometimes lost on those of us who may not know the differences between calico and cretonne, or silk and

1. Annette Kolodny, “A Map for Rereading: Gender and the Interpretation of Literary Texts,” *The New Feminist Criticism*, ed. Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon, 1985), 58.

2. See Elaine Showalter, *Sister’s Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women’s Writing* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 145-66; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), 520-26, 638-42.

3. Margot Peters, *Unquiet Soul: A Biography of Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), 309.

4. Showalter, *Sister’s Choice*, 146-51; Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Women’s Press, 1984; rpt. New York: Routledge, 1989).

serge. But while we often have no sense of textile distinctions and value, we do understand that clothing in literature becomes the surrogate of the wearer and a symbol of identity, even when removed from the body. Disposal of clothing can represent disintegration as in Plath's *The Bell Jar* when Esther throws her new outfits from a New York rooftop, or it can represent integration with a spiritual power, as in Atwood's *Surfacing* and Warner's *Lolly Willowes*, where women express connection to the gods of nature by leaving a piece of clothing in a sacred place. As these examples suggest, cloth associated with a person carries an aura of that person—like the hide of an animal or the feathers of a bird. This sensed, intuitive connection between cloth and person resonates in domestically-based literature by Mary Wilkins and other nineteenth-century authors.<sup>5</sup>

The capacity of fabric to represent identity in both nineteenth- and twentieth-century women's literature hints at the greater meanings cloth has carried through the ages. Cloth in the form of clothing represents identity, yes, but textiles also remind us that this identity exists as a part of a larger entity. As anthropologists Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider explain, textiles in primitive cultures represented the "sacred values" of society<sup>6</sup>—meanings suggested even today in altar cloths, ceremonial robes, uniforms, wedding gowns, and christening dresses. Because of its wrapping function—because it is woven of continuous fibers and is flexible, adaptable, and conforms to any shape while remaining itself—cloth "evoke[s] ideas of connectedness."<sup>7</sup> Cut into pieces, the same cloth can be both kept and given away as an expression of remaining together while apart—a message inscribed into nineteenth-century friendship quilts made as souvenirs for departing friends. And because even delicate fabric—a dress, a tablecloth, a quilt—can survive for generations of owners, cloth binds people "not only to each other but to the ancestors of their past and the progeny . . . [of] their future."<sup>8</sup>

Given this wrapping quality, cloth in nineteenth-century literature often suggests community. The interweaving warp and woof, the intricate patterns of mutually supporting threads, provide a metaphor for complex human webs, especially in stories examining the ways an artist interconnects with, supports, and is supported by the life around her. Mary Wilkins takes advantage of this inherent meaning of cloth in "An Honest Soul," "On the Walpole Road," and "Sister Liddy"—three stories in which she uses cloth and clothing as central images to explore the artist's relationship to the social fabric.

As a woman writer, Wilkins felt uncertain about her role in society; these stories reveal that core conflict as Wilkins puzzles out the transactions between a writer and her audience. Art is a commodity in "An Honest Soul," a gift freely shared and gladly received in "On the Walpole Road," and a frantic performance

5. See, for example, the discussion of cloth symbolism in Deborah G. Lambert, "Rereading Mary Wilkins Freeman: Autonomy and Sexuality in *Pembroke*," *Critical Essays on Mary Wilkins Freeman*, ed. Shirley Marchalonis (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1991), 200-03.

6. Annette B. Weiner and Jane Schneider, *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington: Smithsonian, 1989), 24.

7. Weiner and Schneider, 2.

8. Weiner and Schneider, 3.

designed to ward off a hostile audience in “Sister Liddy.” Taken in sequence, these three models trace the development of Wilkins’ career from her early focus on earning a living, to her mid-career vision of artistic balance in the late 1880’s and early 90’s, to her later anxious concerns about her image. But these three modes also existed simultaneously: she was always an astute business woman, well aware of the market value of her work; her visionary mode was brief but recurring; and defensiveness and self-criticism plagued her entire career. Since Wilkins stubbornly refused to speculate on her artistic process for scholars writing about U.S. literary history, these stories give an illuminating look at the art of a writer who has been called “an anomaly in American literature.”<sup>9</sup>

In “An Honest Soul,” cloth’s wrapping function underscores meaning for the artist and enriches an otherwise simple commercial transaction. This self-portrait of the apprentice artist was written in 1884, at the beginning of Mary Wilkins’ career, a year after she had moved to Randolph, when she was struggling to make a living. The story opens with Martha, who supports herself by “[weaving] rag-carpets, piec[ing] bed-quilts, braid[ing] rugs, etc.,” figuring out what she will earn from making two quilts and adding that on to her “dollar an’ sixty-three cents” and the meager stores of food she has on hand.<sup>10</sup> This seamstress, appropriately surnamed “Patch,” eyes the “pieces” in two bags that two neighbors have left for quilts. These are her artistic materials.

The design of Martha’s “fragment of a house”—and the word “fragment” here repeats the metaphor of her last name—conveys her isolation as an unintegrated “patch,” an unmarried woman artist, for the front wall facing the road has no doors and windows, “only a blank, unbroken wall” (78). A legacy from her parsimonious and shortsighted father, this blind facade represents the cut off and closed off woman’s life bequeathed by patriarchal culture. Confined to her domestic sphere, the single woman lacks the male tie to the public sphere afforded her married sisters by nineteenth-century ideology. Tiring of her backyard view of cows and children, Martha wants a “front winder” to “git a sight of the folks goin’ to meetin’ . . .” as she sits and sews (80).

Martha Patch’s situation mirrors Mary Wilkins’. Mary’s father, like Martha’s, lacked foresight, and her inheritance was similarly meager. Like Martha, Mary supported herself with her craft and continually worried about money. Likewise, she hungered for a perspective on other lives. According to her first biographer, Thomas Schuler Shaw, she hated to write in her downstairs room because the window looked out on the blank wall of a neighbor’s house: she always wrote upstairs where she could watch the village from an overlooking window.<sup>11</sup> In addition, what Wilkins says about Martha—that she “seized eagerly upon the few objects of interest which did come within her vision, and made much of

9. Mary R. Reichardt, “Mary Wilkins Freeman: One Hundred Years of Criticism,” *Legacy* 4 (Fall 1987): 31.

10. Mary E. Wilkins, “An Honest Soul,” *A Humble Romance and Other Stories* (New York: Harper, 1887), 78. Subsequent references in text.

11. Thomas Schuler Shaw, “A Nineteenth Century Puritan, Being a Biography of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman” (1931), Unpublished Biography, Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., 42.

them" (81)—applies equally to Wilkins. Martha's desire for interesting sights parallels Mary's interest in the details of village life that inspired her stories, and suggests as well the similarity between "piecing" bits of material into a quilt and "seizing" details and fragments of memories and "making much of them." In a letter to Sarah Orne Jewett, Wilkins shows her sense that writing is piecing, saying, "everything you have heard, seen, or done, since you opened your eyes on the world, is coming back to you . . . to go into stories."<sup>12</sup> As modern commentators point out, arranging details in a story, organizing patches in a quilt, and ordering stories in a volume all rely on similar artistic impulses. Discussing the parallels between piecing and writing, Elaine Showalter shows how the quilt made up of pieces provides a metaphor for the volume of "sketches" or "pieces," a predominant woman's form in the nineteenth century.<sup>13</sup> Viewed in light of Showalter's analysis, Mary Wilkins' collections of stories, most notably *A Humble Romance* and *A New England Nun*, are especially quilt-like in that her stories are remarkably consistent in color and form—a quality noted by some of her earliest critics.<sup>14</sup>

Martha the quilter, then, like Mary the writer, responds eagerly to her material, especially the pieces with "leetle pink roses" in one woman's bag. This fabric is not just rags; it is "French" and "caliker." Imported textiles were valuable: even wealthy people carefully conserved scraps.<sup>15</sup> Martha knows these pieces have the added significance of being from a new dress, rare enough in a frugal New England village to be remembered for years. Like a good short story, which pieces together memories of the past, observations of the present, and fantasies of the future, the artwork to be made from this French calico and other pieces connects past to present and future. In particular, as remnants of a new dress, the pink-flowered scraps carry the essence of the person for whom the dress was made. For the owner of the quilt, this cloth evokes the dress wearer, her outline, shape, and color; these scraps of pink will become part of a quilt where they will henceforth be reminders of the dress and the woman it wrapped. As artistic material, the colorful pieces inspire Martha. She gazes at them in admiration, saying, "That jest takes my eye" (80). She sits down at her back window and proceeds to piece her quilts, liberally working in the pink material.

But Martha mixes up the pieces of cloth as she stitches the two quilts. Completing her work, she finds to her horror that she has put the French calico in the wrong quilt. Ever conscientious, she rips apart and remakes the quilts, a long and exacting process, repeated for a second time. Once she learns this beautiful material evokes Mrs. Bennet's Hattie, and therefore a precious history, she recognizes an error tantamount, in her artist vocabulary, to including a jarring color in a painting or an inconsistent detail in a story. Driven by artistic integrity,

12. Mary Wilkins to Sarah Orne Jewett, 10 December 1889, letter 50 in *The Infant Sphinx: Collected Letters of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*, ed. Brent L. Kendrick (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1985), 99.

13. Showalter, *Sister's Choice*, 151-53.

14. See anonymous review of *A New England Nun* in *Spectator* 67 (Oct. 3, 1891): 449. "Twenty-four stories so alike to one another in matter and form, are really too many."

15. Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 28-31.

she repeats the ripping and resewing a third, final, grueling time.

The slow starvation Martha endures as she works signals her alienation as a “patch,” as an artist who feels the lack of sustaining care from her community. Her need to get the quilts exactly right nearly kills her, but even at the point of collapse she thinks, “I’m glad I got them quilts done right fust” (87). The drive for perfection forces her to remake the quilts until they are constructed according to her sense of rightness, a sense derived from her knowledge that the scraps carry the meaning of the quilt. Wilkins’ own similar compulsion for accuracy was documented in an 1887 letter to Hamlin Garland in which she wrote of the one conscious goal of her work: “Yes, I do think more of making my characters *true* and having them say and do just the things they *would* say and do, than of anything else and that is the only aim in literature of which I have been really conscious myself.”<sup>16</sup> Martha’s desire for accuracy reflects Wilkins’ aim. Because the pieces of calico represent Hattie to Mrs. Bennet, they make the quilt “true.”

Finally, the chain of events that leads Martha close to collapse results in that long-desired front window. The friendly neighbor who rescues her from exhaustion and hunger proposes that her husband will put in a window in return for some sewing. The woman serves as an intermediary, connecting Martha with the necessary male agency. Through the kindness of friends, Martha will bond with the people outside her walls. When she tells her neighbor, “It’s nothin’ but play piecin’ quilts. All I mind is not havin’ a front winder to set to while I’m doin’ on’t” (89), she is saying that the artist needs to feel as if she is part of the larger fabric of the community. Sewing at her front window, Martha is transformed from a patch to patchwork, to a piece integrated into the community pattern.

Another story about cloth and community, “On the Walpole Road,” also portrays the woman artist as a respected community participant, but she is a visionary, as well, a prophet—not a partner in a commercial exchange. Wilkins wrote her Utopian vision of the ideal relationship of artist and audience between 1884 and 1887. Working only for the pleasure of herself and her audience, the artist of “On the Walpole Road” shares a story about shared material. In the frame story, two women, Mis’ Green and Almiry, artist and audience, drive a horse and wagon on a hot summer day. Unlike the struggling Martha Patch, Mis’ Green exudes the confidence of her maturity: “She had a double, bristling chin, her gray eyes twinkled humorously over her spectacles, and she wore a wide-flaring black straw bonnet with purple bows on the inside of the rim.”<sup>17</sup>

The plodding horse and a brewing storm remind Mis’ Green of another trip along this same road when another storm threatened. To pass the time, she tells a meandering tale which begins with the garbled message of her beloved Aunt Rebecca’s death. On the way to the funeral, she relates, she and her husband get caught in the rain on the Walpole Road. When they arrive at last, soaked, they

16. Mary Wilkins to Hamlin Garland, 23 November 1887, letter 28 in Kendrick, 83.

17. Mary E. Wilkins, “On the Walpole Road,” *A Humble Romance and Other Stories*, 134. Subsequent references in text.

find Rebecca's house and barn struck by lightning and water everywhere, but the story takes a comic turn when Rebecca herself steps out to greet them. Aunt Rebecca's husband Enos has died, it turns out, not Rebecca. All in all, the day makes Mis' Green "kinder highstericky," but Rebecca retains her icy calm. To explain Rebecca's absence of emotion, Mis' Green launches into the history of Rebecca and Enos, and then the subsequent history of Rebecca and Abner, her first love, whom she marries after Enos' death. Even though this second marriage follows death, fire, and flood, it is not heaven on earth, and Aunt Rebecca dies soon afterwards.

This anticlimactic love story is flat and a little bitter. However, as in so many Mary Wilkins stories, the real emotion of Mis' Green's tale lies not in Rebecca's marriages but rather in the warm bond between the women. "I'd allers thought a sight of her," Mis' Green says of her aunt. "I couldn't get along without goin' to see Aunt Rebecca once in so often; I'd get just as lonesome an' homesick as could be." Even though Rebecca never talked about her feelings, we know the affection was reciprocated, for she nursed Sarah Green and her children through typhus fever, saving their lives, according to Mis' Green, who says they "should ha' died ef it hadn't been for her" (137).

This emotion is conveyed by the language of cloth. When she hears the false news of Rebecca's death, Mis' Green says, "I felt too bad to cry. I didn't, till I happened to look down at the apron I had on. It was like a dress she had; she had a piece left, an' she gave it to me for an apron. When I saw that, I bust right out sobbin'." Reacting to the tragic news in shock and disbelief, Mis' Green can only repeat, "Oh Lord . . . this apron she give me!" The apron calls up her feelings again and again: "Every time I looked at that apron, it seemed as if I should die" (138).

Wilkins shows how an exchange of cloth, an apron in the same material as a dress, expresses the deep feelings which connect the two women. Mis' Green's glance down at her body, wrapped in her aunt's material, suggests the way she identifies with Rebecca. Sharing material—like the scraps of pink calico from Hattie's dress or clothes cut from the same piece of fabric—was an act of friendship which symbolized union and devotion. This intimate sharing was particularly meaningful when the friends or family members did not see each other often. On at least one occasion, Mary Wilkins herself shared a piece of a new dress with her friend and mentor, *Harper's Bazaar* editor Mary Louise Booth. In 1886 she writes to Miss Booth, "I have a new blue dress, and I am going to send you a bib. Isn't it a pretty color?"<sup>18</sup> Sharing the "bib" (top part of an apron) signified affection and intimacy, particularly since Booth like Wilkins loved beautiful fabrics.<sup>19</sup> For Rebecca and Mis' Green, as for Mary Wilkins and Mary Louise Booth, such a souvenir enabled friends to maintain contact while

18. Mary Wilkins to Mary Louise Booth, a fragment Kendrick dates as "after March 17, 1886," letter 9 in Kendrick, 66.

19. Harriet Prescott Spofford, "Mary Louise Booth," *Our Famous Women* (Hartford, Conn.: A.D. Worthington & Co., 1884), 133.

separated. The apron testifies that the two women are cut out of the same cloth. Its material constitutes a tangible “piece” of memory which Mis’ Green pieces together with other memories and preserves as an emotional sign in a larger “piece,” her story. The intimate memories associated with the apron are contrasted with other, more formal and public references to grief, also called up by cloth. When Mis’ Green dons her “best black gown” and wraps herself in her “good black shawl” and wears her “black bunnit” (138), her clothes remind her of another sad occasion: “They were things I had when mother died” (139). The garb she wears connects past to present; it ties her mother’s funeral with her aunt’s and also symbolizes the kinship between all three women. And because she threw on her clothes in “such a flutter,” this black mourning dress—a public symbol of her grief—is layered over her old calico dress and apron, suggesting the layers of feelings involved.

Just as Aunt Rebecca shares her material with Mis’ Green, Mis’ Green shares her story with her appreciative audience, Almiry, a “plain featured and energetic” woman who jogs the horse along, slapping at him mechanically and listening to Mis’ Green’s tale. Both cloth and story embody what Weiner and Schneider call the “mystical quality” of being “an expression of ‘keeping while giving.’” The apron reminds Mis’ Green of Rebecca, of her generosity and loving care. Similarly, the story tells Almiry of Rebecca’s generosity and of the love between Rebecca and Sarah Green. Apron and story enable Mis’ Green to “bring the past actively into the present.”<sup>20</sup> Time merges into the eternal present of art, suggested by a reference to the millennium in the interchange between artist and audience at the beginning of the frame story. This reference suggests Mary Wilkins’ own sense of her art as a mystical transaction which she refused to analyze. The millennium—that promised thousand years of Christ’s reign on earth—will come, says Mis’ Green, not with a masculine blast from Gabriel’s trumpet, but “kinder like the robins an’ flowers do in the spring, kinder meltin’ right into everything else, sweet an’ nateral like.” The references to birds and flowers, the melting, and the sweetness constitute an alternative female version of the end of the world, similar to the Adventist theories of Ellen G. White and other religious mystics who believed the apocalypse was already underway.<sup>21</sup> When Almiry says Mis’ Green’s account of the millennium “ain’t accordin’ to Scripture,” Mis’ Green replies, “It’s accordin’ to my Scripture” (136). As she puts it,

“Thar ain’t so much difference in things on this airth as thar is in the folks that see ’em. It’s me a-seein’ the Scripturs, an’ it’s you a-seein’ the Scripturs, Almiry, an’ you see one thing an’ I another, an’ I dare say we both see crooked mostly, with maybe a little straight mixed up with it, an’ we’ll never reely know how much is straight till we see to read it by the light of the New Jerusalem.” (136)

20. Weiner and Schneider, 26.

21. See the discussion in Jonathan M. Butler, “The Making of a New Order: Millerism and the Origins of Seventh-day Adventism,” *The Disappointed: Millerism and Millenarianism in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Ronald L. Numbers and Jonathan M. Butler (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1987), 189-205.



In this pronouncement, Mis' Green establishes the authority and rightness of her own vision—her “scripture”—for herself. This insight applies to the story she tells as well. Since Aunt Rebecca was never one to say how she was feeling about things, Mis' Green has pieced together her story from what she has heard and seen. To her mind, this quilt is “true”; “me a-seein' the Scriptures” is good enough for her. She offers no platitudes. She tells what happened from her own point of view, with confidence, using direct, colloquial, and concrete language. She is a realist, like Mary Wilkins at her best. The story she tells is her version of reality, and Almiry, after Mis' Green has finished, supports Mis' Green's version by saying, “I like to hear you” (147).

An intelligent listener, supportive but not a pushover, Almiry is convinced that Mis' Green's way of seeing is “straight.” She is satisfied and entertained by Mis' Green's woman-centered vision. Like Martha Patch's neighbor, who lends her husband's carpentry skills, the sympathetic friend or neighbor as audience weaves the artist into the fabric of her community. According to Josephine Donovan, women's literary realism—the tradition of women listening to and supporting each other's stories in the U.S.—culminates in Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), the story of an artist learning empathic skills from a wise woman, the herbalist Mrs. Todd.<sup>22</sup> Wilkins' story of Almiry and Mis' Green may well have inspired Jewett's story of “Almiry” Todd, whose mother lives on Green Island.

But beyond the coincidence of names, another more significant resemblance between the two works lies in the similar artist portraits they offer. Mrs. Todd and her mother have an exquisitely developed “tact” which the narrator says is a “kind of mind-reading” and which constitutes a uniquely female dimension in literature.<sup>23</sup> Willa Cather calls this tact “the gift of sympathy,” and regards this ability to enter into a loving empathy with the feelings of another person as the highest attribute of the artist.<sup>24</sup> Like *The Country of the Pointed Firs*, “On the Walpole Road” also centers on a woman who possesses the empathic skills, the storyteller Mis' Green. The shared cloth symbolizes the sympathetic bond between Rebecca and Sarah Green. Mis' Green's artistic empathy enables her to “see” Rebecca with understanding, to read through Rebecca's reticence. Mis' Green realizes the price that Rebecca's control has cost her and understands why Rebecca seems so unemotional: “maybe, ef she'd married the man she'd wanted [first], she'd cried easier” (145). Like Mary Wilkins in the late 1880's, Mis' Green is an artist at the height of her powers, outspoken and empathetic, wise and humorous, who sees life clearly and doesn't expect too much, for she knows heaven on earth occurs only in rare moments of sympathy and understanding

22. Josephine Donovan, *New England Local Color Literature: A Woman's Tradition* (New York: Ungar, 1983), 2-10.

23. For the woman with empathic skills as artist see Marcia McClintock Folsom, “‘Tact Is a Kind of Mind-Reading’: Empathic Style in Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs*,” *Colby Library Quarterly* 18 (1982): 66-78.

24. Willa Cather, “Preface” to Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1925; rpt. Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956).

between the artist, her material, and her audience.

Mary Wilkins' early stories show her working in the Mis' Green mode, sharing her insights with confidence in her own scripture. If we can believe the accounts of her methods of composing that appear in the early gossipy reviews, she wrote spontaneously, often beginning with a picture or a concept, like the threatening thunderstorm that started Mis' Green's reveries on the Walpole Road.<sup>25</sup> She refused to analyze this artistic process, particularly for scholars who wrote with intrusive questions. In 1897 she told Henry Loomis Nelson that she never knew at the beginning of a story what was going to happen, ". . . and if I try to force the knowledge . . . I fear I shall spoil it all."<sup>26</sup> Responding to a long list of inquiries from Fred Lewis Pattee in 1919, she evaded many of his questions, curtly saying "I have never bothered to analyze myself."<sup>27</sup> In 1913, in "The Girl Who Wants to Write," Wilkins seems to be describing herself when she discusses the writer whose mind "is of the sequential order—possibly I might even term it the creative order." This "creative" writer, Wilkins continues, does not necessarily have a "full-fledged plot and plan of action" when she begins writing.<sup>28</sup> What Wilkins describes is the hit-or-miss method which Helen Hunt Jackson likewise honors, with a sewing metaphor, in her novel *Ramona*:

"Thar ain't enny accountin' fur ther way ther breadths'll come, sometimes; 'pears like 't wuz kind er magic . . . 'tain't much use tryin' ter reckon how 't 'll come aout; but the breadths doos fit heaps better 'n yer'd think; come ter sew 'em, 'tain't never no sech colors ez yer thought 't wuz gwine ter be; but it's allers pooty, allers . . ."<sup>29</sup>

Like Jackson's Aunt Ri, Wilkins had a sense of her writing as a magical, instinctive sewing together of material with little planning but with fidelity to detail, a feeling for the "truth" of characters and actions, and a sense of community with her audience. In 1885 she wrote to Mary Louise Booth that her method of writing could not be forced, that she had to just let it happen: "I have a feeling that . . . it is more a question of natural growth, than of deliberate efforts though I suppose that is against all the rules and precepts."<sup>30</sup> In 1887 she again expresses to Booth the conviction that she must make her own way: "I begin to see very plainly that there are rocks ahead in my literary course that I may split upon; though I cannot just define their nature to myself. One of these days if I can find out my own rocks, I think I may acquire more decision of motion, but I shall have to find them out myself."<sup>31</sup>

25. See, for example, Joseph Edgar Chamberlin, "Miss Mary E. Wilkins at Randolph Mass.," *Critic* (NY) NS 29 (March 5, 1898): 155-57; Margaret Hamilton Welch, "American Authoresses of the Hour," *Harper's Bazaar* (29 January 1900): 68.

26. Mary Wilkins to Henry Loomis Nelson, 31 August 1897, letter 217 in Kendrick, 195.

27. Mary Wilkins Freeman to Fred Lewis Pattee, 25 September 1919, letter 442 in Kendrick, 385.

28. Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, "The Girl Who Wants to Write: Things to Do and Avoid," *Harper's Bazaar* 48 (1913): 272.

29. Helen Hunt Jackson, *Ramona* (1884; rpt. New York: Triangle, 1941), 410.

30. Mary Wilkins to Mary Louise Booth, 21 April 1885, letter 6 in Kendrick, 63.

31. Mary Wilkins to Mary Louise Booth, 5 November 1887, letter 27 in Kendrick, 82.

These passages show that Wilkins sees herself as an artist similar to Martha Patch, working to her own exacting standards. She is also close to Mis' Green, believing that even if her method may not follow the Scripture, it follows *her* scripture. She is aware of a "natural growth" in her work which goes against "rules and precepts," but the nature of which she must find out by herself. Like Mis' Green, she responds to a particular rural locale: as she tells Hamlin Garland in a letter, "So far I have written about the things of which I know the most."<sup>32</sup> She writes about what she has observed and experienced even if she goes against romantic and sentimental stereotypes. She pieces together what she sees and she trusts her audience will accept her work.

But Wilkins was right about the "rocks" ahead, perhaps inevitable when a sensitive writer with little education relies on intuition and audience goodwill. These rocks surface in "Sister Liddy" (written between 1887 and 1891), a final example of a Wilkins story that uses symbols of cloth and clothing to show the artist's relationship to her community. Like "On the Walpole Road," "Sister Liddy" is about a storyteller in the process of telling her story, but the process, the story, and the relation to audience are strikingly different. Here Wilkins dramatizes the artist who writes not out of an inner sense of a story she wants to share with a responsive listener, but out of a need to fabricate a self that will earn the approval of a hostile, uncaring audience. This artist, Polly Moss, dies from a falseness to herself personified in a dummy "sister" she creates and clothes to mediate with her audience. In describing this creation, Mary Wilkins writes of a painful and destructive state which she knew something about.

While Mis' Green is "hale and portly," Polly Moss is a "dretful-lookin' cretur" who limps and is so bent over "her little pale triangular face seemed to look from the middle of her flat chest."<sup>33</sup> She lives in the almshouse, "deformed and poor and friendless" (92), lowest of all among those who are reduced to being little more than mouths. This institution is a new, fine building, standing alone in the glaring sun on a bare lot. Perhaps an intentional paradigm for the United States at this point in history, the almshouse serves as a microcosm of the materialistic world, separated from God and devoid of human love. The Utopia of "On the Walpole Road" has become a dystopia; the inmates are despondent and addled, or cruel and competitive. Unlike the supportive, caring female community developed in "An Honest Soul" and "On the Walpole Road," the disparate and desperate women in this institution battle each other for shreds of dignity. In contrast to the birds and flowers of Mis' Green's "sweet and nateral" millennium, the portents for the coming New Jerusalem in "Sister Liddy" are a sinister accompaniment to the alien setting. One sardonic woman sees ominous mutations in nature, and claims "the signs are increasin'" for a cataclysmic apocalypse, while the others mutter and complain.

In this atmosphere of malaise, the paupers practice a cruel oneupmanship as

32. Mary Wilkins to Hamlin Garland, 23 November 1887, letter 28 in Kendrick, 83.

33. Mary E. Wilkins, "Sister Liddy," *A New England Nun and Other Stories* (New York: Harper, 1891), 84. Subsequent references in text.

they boast about their past possessions. Clothing—literally material, in this most material time and place—is crucial. One woman refers to a piece of heavy silk in a drawer as if it were money in the bank, and indeed clothing in this story equals money. While shared material suggests unity in “An Honest Soul” and “On the Walpole Road,” for women in the almshouse, clothing is a commodity, a weapon, a symbol of superiority. Rather than cloth’s emotional or mystical properties, its value and status are dominant. Like most nineteenth-century American women, Wilkins’ poorhouse characters know the social and financial distinctions between delaine, calico, muslin, net, silk, and lawn. Like the Babson sisters in “A Gala Dress” they are well aware of the great advantages of wearing silk when their neighbors dress in chocolate calico.<sup>34</sup>

Piece by piece, the women recite a litany of clothing they once had. Just as Mis’ Green’s black dress reminds her of her mother’s funeral, these women’s memories of cloth and clothing connect them to their past lives. But what matters to them is the material value, not the sentiment. The now-imaginary articles they describe transform these paupers, ranking them. One had a lace cap, another a good thibet, another “a handsome blue silk,” another a white drawnsilk bonnet with a feather and a “black silk spencer cape” (90-91). The pink calico that indicated a loving relationship between Hattie and Mrs. Bennet in “An Honest Soul” suggests a pathetic kind of status in “Sister Liddy,” for even Sally, the confused old woman who tears up beds, once had “a pink caliker gownd” (92). But Polly Moss has had nothing, not one of the things by which female worth is reckoned in this materialistic age—not silk, lace, nor even calico, much less a home or household goods. Polly’s humiliation delights the other inmates. Their accounts of past glories gain “a gusto” from this silent listener who cannot join in.

So Polly Moss invents a sister, Liddy, and tells her story. Sister Liddy is the ultimate sentimental heroine, a veritable catalog of female fantasy. As Polly tells it, her blonde, fair sister wore silk dresses, draped her form in cashmere shawls, and framed her face with “a bunnit with a pink wreath.” She had a feather fan and “a whole chistful of clothes, real fine cotton cloth, all tucks an’ laid-work, an’ she had a pair of silk stockings, an’ some white shoes.” When she married “a real rich fellar from Boston,” Liddy “come out bride” in full glory “in a blue silk dress, an’ a black lace mantilly, an’ a white bunnit trimmed with lutestring ribbon” (94-95). After her marriage, Polly continues, Liddy lived in Boston with velvet carpets, big pictures in gilt frames, stuffed furniture “kivered with red velvet,” a piano, “great big marble images a-settin’ on her mantel-shelf,” and a coach, and a hired girl, and a baby (95).

Polly creates this paragon for an audience of women, but unlike Almiry, Mis’ Green’s audience, Polly’s audience is not going the same way she is. Her audience of paupers is hostile, calling her “the wust-lookin’ objeck” (84), delighting in her deformity because it enables them to look down on her. Thus when Polly speaks of Sister Liddy, she gets back at the women in her audience:

34. Mary E. Wilkins, “A Gala Dress,” *A New England Nun and Other Stories*, 37-53.

She says to a vain woman, "She was jest as fair as a lily—a good deal fairer than you ever was, Mis' Handy . . ." (94). Polly confronts her audience like a lion tamer with a whip, expanding and adding accessories to her story of Sister Liddy until the strain of the fabrication leads to her death.

Mary Wilkins describes Polly as an artist, based on a male model: "Old Polly Moss, her little withered face gleaming with reckless enthusiasm, sang the praises of her sister Liddy as wildly and faithfully as any minnesinger his angel mistress" (96). As an artist, Polly successfully asserts herself. Tired of being the passive listener to their boasting, she tells her story to compete with the other women, but the gender of her model suggests its ultimate falseness. Nevertheless, this desperate effort earns the respect of her audience, as we know by the way they listen "with ever-increasing bewilderment and awe" (96). She tells her tale to impress an audience, to project an image of herself, sharing in the reflected glory of such a sister. But what she cobbles together is a false persona, a dressed up monster, a Frankenstein who eventually destroys her. Instead of "making [her] characters true" and recounting events as truthfully as she can, instead of sharing her scripture, Polly manufactures grandiose details of impossible splendors, not to bring her past into the future, not to create, not to share, but to impress.

The story Polly Moss tells bears many resemblances to the fantasies of female desires that Wilkins started telling around 1900, when she married and left the female community of Mary Wales and Randolph, Massachusetts. Like many later Wilkins novels, the Sister Liddy story illustrates the values of a materialistic society, values that became increasingly important to Mary Wilkins: the husband from Boston (or New Jersey), the grand house, the coach, the hired girl, and above all the clothing—the almost palpable *materials*—the tucked cottons, the heavy silks, the cashmeres, laces, and furs.

In "An Honest Soul" and "On the Walpole Road," Wilkins portrays the satisfying relationship between artist and audience that she herself achieved in the 80's and early 90's, while in "Sister Liddy" she predicts her future artistic difficulties with uncanny prescience. These stories with their subtle metaphors of cloth and clothing support Shirley Marchalonis' assertion that Wilkins was a conscious artist, not just the simple recorder of a dying New England culture.<sup>35</sup> In these stories and many others, Wilkins examines the artist's role in society with depth and insight, and she documents as well the irresistible "sacred values" of developing United States culture, embodied for women in textiles rather than in factories, banks, woodlots, and farmland. The inmate who at the beginning of "Sister Liddy" watches for signs of the coming millennium is granted her vision: truly here with all its ironies is the capitalist's "heaven on earth." The women in her audience might not like the message, but they would understand her text.

35. Shirley Marchalonis, "Introduction," *Critical Essays on Mary Wilkins Freeman*, ed. Shirley Marchalonis (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1991), 9-12.

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