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Women's Reading and Space in Robert Braithwaite Martineau's *The Last Chapter*

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Abstract

The subject of women readers has seen a growth of interest in recent years, with contributions including accounts of women's reading practices, representations of women readers in painting and literature and the value of feminism to studies of reading. This essay examines the representation of a woman reader in *The Last Chapter* (1863), a painting by the Victorian artist Robert Braithwaite Martineau (1826-69). Going beyond existing interpretations of the work, I argue that this ambiguous painting represents not a visual illustration of a particular type of reader, as has been suggested, but an evocation of spaces constructed through reading. Central to my discussion therefore is the issue of reading spaces and the idea of space as the point at which physical and mental aspects of the reading process coincide. I compare examples of fictional accounts of reading, in particular the one found in *Jane Eyre*, to Martineau's painting to produce an interdisciplinary discussion of how women's reading spaces were conceived and represented in the nineteenth century, and of the related issues of subjectivity, exploration and escapism.

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Robert Braithwaite Martineau's painting *The Last Chapter* (1863, Fig. 1) depicts a well-dressed woman reading a slim volume – seemingly taken from the shelves in the background – the title of which is printed on the spine but is not legible to the viewer of the painting. The reader kneels in the family sitting-room which contains a *chaise longue*, piano and bookcase. Although dark, the painting is richly coloured; the *chaise longue* is a deep red and the woman's dress, which is illuminated by the light of the fire, is luxuriant in its fluid texture and finish, seeming to ripple where the fabric folds. The reader's expression appears distant and she is transfixed by the pages of her book. She wears a slight smile on her face, which is bathed in a golden light from the glow of the fireplace.

Garrett Stewart has observed that several paintings of women reading feature an open book whose lines are illegible to the viewer of the painting but whose text is displaced onto nearby striped upholstery (225). This treatment occurs in *The Last Chapter* – the floor covering, the dress and the seat containing stripes of one kind or another. In the background is a bookcase containing further volumes whose titles cannot be read, as cannot the sheet music at the piano nor the caption underneath the painting on the wall.¹ The page number on the top left-hand corner of the open book, the header in the upper centre of the page and the main block of text are all visible but not discernible. The effect of such deferral of legibility is, as Stewart suggests, that “the sitter is couched in lineation per se, nestled in the projected emblems of what she reads or has read to her” (225). Textuality of this nature is inscribed across the canvas of *The Last Chapter*; each area becomes a surface to be read, the texture of the sumptuous dress begging to be explored and the artist inviting us to examine the reader's illuminated face. These pictorial ambiguities parallel some of those surrounding accounts of women's reading in the home, contemporary with Martineau's painting, especially in relation to space, as I will explore in this essay. I will discuss the issue of reading spaces – both literal and metaphorical – as they are staged in *The Last Chapter*,

focusing on the crucial themes of subjectivity, exploration and escapism. I will also compare Martineau's figure to another woman reader – Jane Eyre – who finds a secluded space in which to escape, read and foster her sense of identity. In focusing on the representation of space in *The Last Chapter* my aims are twofold; to go beyond existing interpretations of the painting, which attempt to construct a specific narrative for the reading figure, based on the trope of the sensation reader rather than on observing the salient visual qualities of the work itself, and to demonstrate how the painting articulates the importance of space for both real and imagined women readers during the nineteenth century. In proposing an extended discussion of this painting, I suggest a model for looking at and interpreting images of women reading that takes into account iconographical traditions of the woman reader, which involves a foregrounded consideration of space (given its importance in the experiences of nineteenth-century women readers) and which is attuned to the significance of interiority and unseen and metaphorical spaces. Ultimately, I suggest that Martineau's painting is not so much a picture of a reader but is an evocative visual register of a reading process and the experiences involved in and created by reading. In the first section of this essay I situate Martineau's reader in relation to contemporary debates about women's reading and visual traditions of depicting women readers. In the second section I deal with what I see as the chief visual characteristic of this painting – the depiction of multiple and intersecting types of space.

Iconographies of the Female Reader

The subject of reading was central to Victorian culture. Women's reading habits, especially novel-reading, were under particular scrutiny, with extensive commentary and advice on women's reading practices published in books and periodicals during the nineteenth century. Critics believed that such advice was both desired and needed by the public. The critic of *The Fortnightly Review* in 1889 was certainly justified in noting that: "People can scarcely

complain that they have not been informed as to what they ought to read” (Gattie 307). The guidance, however, went far beyond that of merely what to read; the Rev. J.E.C. Welldon claimed in 1894: “It is not enough that people should be told to read; they must be told how they ought to read, and what.” (215). Thus, advice was given on numerous aspects of reading practices, including what not to read, how to read, at what time of day, for how long, how often, with whom and where. Influential and popular writers such as Mrs. Ellis and John Ruskin offered instruction on a variety of aspects of reading, and female characters in novels could be found advising younger relatives or acquaintances on the subject of reading.² It was also assumed that the book was an important source of domestic and romantic knowledge for women: “Much of love”, claimed Lord Bowen (a well-known judge), “has only been learned under the instruction of some woman who has herself only learned it from a book” (quoted in Humphreys 36).

The figure in *The Last Chapter* has previously been identified as a reader of ‘sensation’ fiction. Kate Flint claims: “She is unmistakably caught up in one of the fashionably controversial ‘sensation novels’” (3).³ Similarly, Lionel Lambourne argues: “The painting is a comment on the contemporary popular craze for ‘sensation novels’” (374).⁴ A contemporary critic also identified the woman as a sensation reader: “a graceful girl, who, as the daylight fails, kneels before the fire to devour by its blaze the close of the sensation story that absorbs her” (“Exhibition of the Royal Academy” 6). The sensation novel was a new type of fiction which emerged in the 1860s and found an avid audience, especially amongst women.⁵ Such novels contained stories of adultery, bigamy, divorce, domestic violence, the revelation of scandalous secrets and passionate or rebellious women eager to escape unsatisfactory marriages. As Sally Mitchell has shown (1977), the 1860s was a significant decade for women’s fiction, and by the mid-1860s literary critics were expressing concern over sensation novels and their impact on a female audience. Moreover, it was believed by critics that readers of sensation fiction displayed certain recognisable tendencies, such as obliviousness to time, absorption and impatience to reach the end of the novel. It was this

state of deep immersion that concerned critics of the time and which Flint sees the woman in *The Last Chapter* as demonstrating:

As we watch her consuming the text avidly, by firelight, we conclude that the book has the power to keep her up and awake beyond the customary hour at which the house goes to bed. Her pose is testimony to the compulsive nature of these fictions: moreover, the lighting of the picture and the angle from which she is portrayed invest her with some of the melodramatic mystery and self-importance of the heroines about whom she reads. (3)

Due to the time of day depicted, the reader's pose and the date of the work, Flint likens the attitude of the woman in *The Last Chapter* not only to readers of sensation fiction, but to the passionate characters of the stories themselves. This interpretation seems fitting enough as the reader appears reluctant to put her book down and has indeed left the curtains open. We might also see in the painting the themes which Michael Fried suggests accompany absorption in reading: seized attention, oblivion and resistance to distraction (13). And yet the woman has a certain calm about her which does not sit easily with the perceived traits of an avid sensation reader. Reading was understood to be an indicator of moral character and the pose of readers was implicated within this system of signification. The eponymous character in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), who frequently reads when she should be engaged in other activities, lies "stretched on a couch, absorbed in reading" (295). The figure in *The Last Chapter* however is upright, suggesting a virtuous rather than transgressive reader. The presence of the *chaise longue*, which the reader ignores in preference for a kneeling position, only makes this more apparent. Indeed, the visual precedents of Martineau's reader, in terms of pose and attitude, are devotional readers such as the Virgin Mary in the *Mérode Altarpiece* by Robert Campin (c. 1425) and the *Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen*, also by Campin (c. 1440, Fig. 2). More specifically, Martineau's reader, with her

three-quarter pose, echoes the foremost devotional figure in Pieter Pourbus's epitaph of *Soyer van Marle* (1578, Fig. 3).⁶

In the interpretation already cited, Lambourne suggests that the reader's position and location in *The Last Chapter* are functional: "Unable to see by the light through the moonlit window, she kneels and holds up the novel to read in the light given by the fire's glowing embers" (374). Antonio Losano goes beyond Lambourne's narrative interpretation in attempting to interpret the woman's mode of reading but brings to bear the trope of the addicted reader in a way that is difficult to reconcile visually with the painting: "She is on her knees because the book has somehow dragged her to that position. Reading deforms a nice girl's body, makes her forget the hour and her dignity, and draws her literally closer to the fire of knowledge." (32). The fire is indeed dangerous but can also be a symbol of devotion or religious ardour (Hall 123), as evident in the *Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen*. And there is nothing deformed or undignified about Martineau's reader (*The Times* described her as "graceful" ("Exhibition of the Royal Academy" 6)). Far from 'dragged' to her knees, we might read this figure as statuesque in her posture. The kneeling position can be seen to represent virtue, rather than degradation. In depictions of the *Madonna Humilitatis* (the Madonna of Humility), it is her position seated on the ground that signifies her humility (Hall 329-30). The same theme is evident in other female figures such as Rogier van der Weyden's *The Magdalen Reading* (c.1435, Fig. 4), whom Lorne Campbell describes as "absorbed" (398).⁷ In this work, the focused act of reading a devotional text indicates the Magdalene's repentance of a sinful past (Campbell 398). It is probable that Martineau was aware of such works; having been a pupil of the Pre-Raphaelite painter Holman Hunt from around 1851 to 1852 (Ironsides and Gere 27) and sharing a studio with Hunt until his death in 1865 (Wood 344), Martineau was likely to have been familiar with fifteenth-century Netherlandish painting admired by the Pre-Raphaelites.⁸

These religious images represent an important iconographic category of women readers – that of the virtuous reader – which the cited interpretations of *The Last Chapter* fail

to take into account. In her study of competing visual representations of femininity in the second half of the nineteenth century, Susan Casteras suggests that the archetypal ideal woman was the “modern Madonna” (186), as for example in Charles West Cope’s *Prayer Time* (c. 1860), which depicts the artist’s wife as an angel of the house or “guardian of the hearth” (“Adversary” 186). Cope popularised this type of quasi-religious painting and his work was admired and drawn on by Ford Madox Brown, for example in *Waiting: an English Fireside* (1854-55) (Bennett 904). Whilst both Cope’s and Brown’s paintings feature a woman and child, hence the classification “modern Madonna”, what is also evident here is the secularisation of the virtuous woman at the site of the hearth, a motif repeated in *The Last Chapter*. Furthermore, Casteras claims that in *Prayer Time* the woman’s “total absorption in a prayerful attitude emphasizes her purity, innocence and humility” (“Adversary” 188), suggesting again the religious connotations of absorption, familiar from our Magdalene reader. The hearth is surely a very salient aspect of *The Last Chapter*, not primarily as a site of danger, as Phegley suggests, but as a signifier of home and domesticity, at a time when the hearth and home were highly morally charged symbols. Given the date of the painting, Martineau’s figure may well be reading a sensation novel (we cannot be sure). However, the interpretation of the various elements of the painting – the woman’s kneeling pose, her position by the fire, her absorption, her expression – as visual ‘evidence’ that this is a sensation reader seems to overlook the most striking visual elements of the painting: its borrowing from the iconography of religious readers against the backdrop of secularised but still religiously charged domestic imagery. The most significant questions about this painting are not so much what she is reading but what does her remarkable upright and serene presence in the room signify, at a time when women readers were depicted as languid? What are the connections between the richness of the painting and the projected reading experience? What is the significance of the multiple spaces which are brought into play? If she is a sensation reader why does she have the trappings of a devotional reader? I do not believe that Martineau was trying to ironise the idea of the

sensation reader by suggesting she was 'devoted' to her novels. Rather, *The Last Chapter* seems to be a refusal of the available tropes of the sensation reader and a register of the importance of religious iconographies of the woman reader in seemingly secular imagery.

Setting is a crucial factor here; one of the striking aspects of Martineau's figure is that she is in total command of her reading, *absorbed*, but not addicted. This is reflected in the ordered scene around her which, again, has religious significance; as John Tosh notes, 'The properly ordered household was widely taken by religious people of all persuasions to be a microcosm of the divinely ordered universe.' (50). This is particularly telling if we compare the scene to that in Holman Hunt's *The Awakening Conscience* (1853), which would have been familiar to Martineau from his time in Hunt's studio. Where the room in *The Last Chapter* is tidy and ordered, governed by the strong straight lines of the carpet, fireplace, the *chaise longue* upholstery, books, curtain folds and balustrade outside, in Hunt's painting it is chaotic, signifying the moral laxity of the woman. Also significant in both works is the theme of female recreation. In *The Awakening Conscience* the kept young woman has been playing music in the company of her lover whilst Martineau's figure has been reading alone. Both are potentially transgressive activities but in *The Last Chapter* the orderly surrounding, devotional pose and serene attitude of the reader connect her to solitary devotional readers. The figures in *The Last Chapter* and *The Awakening Conscience* are actually quite similar in their three-quarter poses, both facing in the same direction, and it is significant that both figures threaten to bound out of the confines of the painting. But whereas Martineau's figure takes up most of the painting, leaving little focus on the objects around her, Hunt's centrally placed figure is surrounded by objects which tell her story, the painting relying on the legibility of the depicted objects in a way which differs from *The Last Chapter*.

Another reason for rejecting an anecdotalising narrative about what the woman in *The Last Chapter* is reading, how she came to be so and what will happen to her is that this is not a narrativising painting. If we compare *The Last Chapter* to more didactic works of the time, such as Augustus Egg's *Past and Present* (1858), which conveys a specific message

about the dangers of reading Balzac (with the word “Balzac” clearly visible on the book’s spine), we can see that *The Last Chapter* offers an entirely different composition in its close focus on a single figure, akin to Pre-Raphaelite works of the 1860s, especially those of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, rather than the panoramic and more theatrical composition of Egg’s painting. This is because the work is not intended to provoke the same kind of narrative reading as *Past and Present* or, indeed, Martineau’s own complex *The Last Day in the Old Home* (1862). Instead the work can be seen to evoke not a linear narrative of transgression, as do the works mentioned above, but an atmospheric, single moment, like Rossetti’s works of the 1860s, which is perhaps why the painting has been seen as the most ‘poetic’ and ‘Pre-Raphaelite’ of Martineau’s works.⁹ We know that, should he have wished to, Martineau was more than capable of producing an anecdotal, moralising or narrative work – *The Last Day in the Old Home* was his most successful work and combines all of these elements to tell the tale of an established family’s downfall after the man of the house has gambled away their wealth on the horses. What is tantalising about *The Last Chapter* is that we do not have the singular narrative of this type of painting or works such as *Past and Present*. Indeed, the painting functions in an entirely different way to contemporary readable pictures; we cannot read the title of the book (as in *Past and Present*), the sheet music (as in *The Awakening Conscience*) or decipher the pictures on the wall (again as in *Past and Present*). To depict a reader absorbed in a text, the nature of which is unavailable to us, presents the viewer with the problem of reading the picture and of the limits (and limitations) of legibility.¹⁰ As we have seen, some scholars have responded to this difficulty by projecting anomalous readings onto the painting, resulting in incongruous descriptions, but to do so ignores the specific visual characteristics and complexities of the work. We can ‘read’ the surface of the woman’s dress, the upholstery, the carpet and so on, but not the more intimate matter of what she herself reads. With the precise nature of the text in *The Last Chapter* unknown and the reader dominating the painting, she becomes the site, in Barthes’ terms, where meaning is “collected” (“Death of the Author” 52), or formed, and we, the viewers, construct our own

meaning when viewing and reading the painting. Ultimately, regardless of whether the book in question is a sensation novel, a focus on *what* the woman reads arguably detracts attention from the equally or more significant matter of *how* she reads. In order to discuss this further, I wish to now turn my attention to the issue of reading spaces.

Reading as the claiming of space

Recent studies of women readers have considered the concept of space as integral to the reading process. Flint, for example, proposes that the act of reading be seen as a means of claiming personal space (102). One of the most contentious aspects of reading was where it should take place. In *The Gentleman's House: or How to Plan English Residences* (1871), Robert Kerr wrote that a library should be “essentially a private retreat ... for a man of learning”, but continued: “at the same time the ladies are not exactly excluded” (quoted in Flint 103).¹¹ By “private” we can infer that the author hoped for a male-only zone, although he begrudgingly admits that women could not be forbidden altogether. Kerr’s emphasis on men’s reading for “learning” suggests that women had little claim to reading for education’s sake, and the desire to exclude women from the library can be seen as an attempt to uphold gender distinctions. In Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South* (1855), evenings were passed with Mr. Hale withdrawn to the library, reading books of his “delight”, whilst Margaret and her mother were “left alone” (18). The locations in which reading took place were crucial, for, as Patricia Okker notes, portraying women reading in a familial area such as the sitting room could “domesticate women’s pleasure in reading”, as we might perceive in *The Last Chapter* (126). In situations where exclusion from the household library was upheld, or where the family were not wealthy enough to possess a library, women of the house were forced to find alternative reading locations. Numerous paintings of the period depict women reading in such private spaces, for example Alice Squire’s *Young Girl Reading in an Attic Bedroom* (1861) or John Callcott Horsley’s *A Pleasant Corner* (1866). Even those articles which

suggested that the woman of the house should be allowed in the library dealt with the problem by recommending that she and her books be allocated a portion of space and kept separate from the rest of the room. A pictorial representation of women's lack of inclusion in the intellectual atmosphere of the library, even when physically permitted into the space, can be seen in C. R. Leslie's *The Library at Holland House* (1841). This painting shows Lord Holland, his wife, their librarian and their secretary in the library of the house (Reynolds 50). Lady Holland is the only figure not reading or holding a book or newspaper and seems somewhat bored as she stares out of the painting fanning herself. Physically she occupies the library but her presence, unlike that of her male companions, is not naturalised. And yet, to return to *The Last Chapter*, Martineau's reader is not entirely marginalised; in her solitude she occupies the domestic space where women, as Angels of the House, presided, and she is close to the hearth, the symbol of the domestic sphere. Susan Casteras refers to the Victorian home as "the primary seat of power where female spirituality and moral superiority both resided" ("Adversary" 186). For writers such as John Ruskin and Mrs Ellis, it was through reading in the home that women could ennoble and guide their male companions, although Ellis would have undoubtedly preferred women to read aloud in the company of others rather than alone (in *The Daughters of England* (1842) she claimed that there was "no social pleasure" better than listening to "an interesting book well read" (201)).

It is evident therefore that the issue of access to, and interaction with, different types of spaces underpins the representation of women readers. Griselda Pollock argues that spaces of masculinity and femininity become "inscribed at the level of both what spaces are open to men and women and what relation a man or woman has to that space and its occupants" (62). This is clearly the case when it comes to reading spaces, evident in *The Last Chapter* where the reader claims a space – and time – for herself. The conscious decision by critics to identify both allocated and prohibited spaces for reading within the home can be seen not only as an attempt to create a separation between the domestic/feminine and the cultural/masculine but also to limit the physical space to which a

female reader had access. The reader in *The Last Chapter* is presumably portrayed in her marital home (she wears a wedding ring) and may enjoy only a compromised relationship with the library, as Kerr would recommend. Her marital status renders her solitary evening reading all the more clandestine as she is pictured indulging a personal passion rather than attending to the needs of her family, a conflict about which women readers in more recent times continue to feel guilty.¹²

Given the fact that Martineau's reader is married, it is worth noting the expectations surrounding reading in relation to a woman's marital status. In *Shirley*, during a discussion on the merits of a married life versus a single one, we are told that Mr. Hall's sister Margaret (who is unmarried and "live[s] single") "is not unhappy: she has her books for pleasure, and her brother for a care" (285). This is testimony to the fact that one of the rare occasions where books were permitted as an unmonitored source of pleasure for women was when the reader was unmarried, and therefore not in immediate danger of neglecting her family, but also not likely to marry, as in the case of Margaret, and therefore not risking ruin through reading. In contrast, reading by Caroline, who is young and yet to be married, is viewed as a sign of conspicuous leisure time and is a last resort, to be taken up only when the other feminine pursuits of sewing and singing had been exhausted. The married status of the woman in *The Last Chapter* places her in a precarious position: why is she reading alone instead of in company, as advocated by Mrs. Ellis? Where are her family and how long will she stay reading? This is clearly a stolen moment.

Pollock suggests that "spaces of femininity" go beyond the physical locations represented to include "those from which femininity is lived as a positionality in discourse and social practice. They are the product of a lived sense of social locatedness, mobility and visibility, in the social relations of seeing and being seen" (66). Such mobility and visibility, or the lack of it, was what demarcated the gendering of certain reading spaces. The physical space surrounding the reader in *The Last Chapter* is the confine of the room and, by metonymy, the house or the domestic sphere. The viewer is encouraged to share these

realms as the physical space of the reader extends towards the notional space of the viewer through the fireplace and the patterning of the carpet or rug. The room seems simultaneously protective yet oppressive, a theme evident in other contemporary representations of domestic space. For example in *North and South* Margaret felt “safe in the drawing-room, with the windows fastened and bolted, and the familiar walls hemming her round, and shutting her in” (61). Confined in both the pictorial space and the space of the depicted room, the woman in *The Last Chapter* reads in a protected setting. Janet Badia and Jennifer Phegley observe that in many paintings of women reading, the subject is depicted in an uncomfortable-looking position, suggesting a conflict between women’s desire to read and any number of competing demands (11). The kneeling, temporary, pose of the woman in *The Last Chapter* is testimony to this opportunist nature of women’s reading, especially when compared to the many images of male readers seated comfortably in their libraries or studies, exercising a command over the space around them and enjoying more sustainable positions.

It is not only physical locations however that constitute the meaning of reading spaces. Flint’s real locations are accompanied by “metaphoric spaces of the mind” (102). Similarly, Bergman-Carton notes that paintings of women readers often consist of “interior spaces, [both] domestic and psychological” (107). A consideration of these realms of space can take us beyond the existing interpretations of *The Last Chapter* which, as we have seen, focus on the literal space depicted. Like Lambourne, Stephen Wildman has suggested that the open curtains in *The Last Chapter* may indicate that “the reader has become too engrossed in her book to draw the curtain and light a lamp” (222). As noted earlier, this is possible, the reader perhaps having moved from an earlier position by the window, but the open curtains serve a wider and, arguably more important, function than this in offering a further visible space to the viewer. The viewer’s gaze in *The Last Chapter* is directed diagonally from the edge of the fireplace at the bottom left-hand corner of the painting, extending through the lines of the reader’s dress, her right arm, the back cover of the book,

into the bottom left-hand corner of the window frame and up to the window, whose open curtains reveal a dusky scene outside. The device of open curtains, especially at dusk or night-time, was often used in paintings which were intended to represent contemplation or reflection, for example Richard Redgrave's *The Sempstress* (1844) or the second painting in Egg's *Past and Present*. Whilst these works are overtly moralising (unlike *The Last Chapter*), in these paintings, and in *The Last Chapter*, the window, with its open curtains, is a crucial part in the construction of another world and the promise of escape and exploration which that may bring for each of the pictured female subjects, even if on a purely imagined level. As William Blisset notes, "Unlike the door, the window is a threshold of perception, not of action." (5). Its inclusion therefore in *The Last Chapter* aids the focus on the figure's (and the viewer's) perception of other worlds as she reads. The relative lack of freedom enjoyed by women in both public and private spaces could be partially compensated for by the vicarious experience of space and freedom offered by reading, an activity which Okker suggests "undermines any certain boundary between public and private: though experienced primarily in a private space, reading inevitably takes people, at least imaginatively, beyond their private, familial world" (117-18). The window in *The Last Chapter* is important not solely as a narrative device, as Lambourne and Wildman suggest, but in the visual representation of exploratory spaces, opened up by the act of reading, which give free play to the imagination.

It is apparent then that three realms are brought together in *The Last Chapter*: the world of the reader, the world portrayed in the book (unknown to us but registered by the reader) and the world viewed through the window. In other words, we might say that an interplay occurs between the reader's physical and mental spaces, the space projected through the reading of the book and the exterior space beyond the home. Lynn Pearce has described this interconnecting of spaces during reading as a confrontation between "self and 'other'" (17), that is, between reader and text, or, what Mark M. Hannelley similarly calls a "self-text equation" (703). Understood this way the three realms in *The Last Chapter* exist in a dialogical relationship as each informs another. David Jasper writes about the suspension

of belief involved when a person reads: “To read anything requires, if you will, an initial act of faith in the text before us.” (8). Because the reader desires to believe in the premise of the book, particularly in the case of fiction, the text, for Jasper, “becomes a “world” which we inhabit for a while” (8-9). Similarly, Roland Barthes writes of the “adventure” of reading, by which he means “the way in which pleasure comes to the reader” (“On Reading” 40). For these commentators, reading is an activity through which other “worlds” are constructed and made real, the very process that is depicted in *The Last Chapter*. Jasper’s description of the text as a “world” reminds us that the text itself can constitute a metaphorical space. It is the immersion in this space of the text, paralleled by but extending beyond the physical spaces of the reader, that we witness in *The Last Chapter*. Unlike the reader in *Past and Present*, whose fate is predestined by the presence of the signifying Balzac text, Martineau’s figure makes her own narrative and creates her own spaces.

The co-existence in *The Last Chapter* of the types of spaces I have been discussing calls to mind one of the most striking fictional examples of a female reader: that found in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). Whilst discussions of Jane’s reading experience may be familiar, a comparison of Jane with Martineau’s reader can highlight further the significance of the formal elements of *The Last Chapter*, which are not accounted for in any of the interpretations cited. It is not only the colliding spaces in *The Last Chapter* that bring to mind Jane, but also the assertion of selfhood, the self-created nature of the reading space and the importance of escapism and interiority. In the opening chapter of *Jane Eyre*, which sets up the oppression and brutality of Jane’s childhood at the mercy of the Reed family, reading is established as an important means of relief, escapism, empowerment and, ultimately, self-definition for the young Jane. On a rainy winter’s day Jane slips out of the drawing-room into the adjoining breakfast-room and selects a volume from the bookcase, ensuring that it is one which contains plenty of pictures; the text she alights upon is Bewick’s *History of British Birds*.¹³ She takes the book and hides in a window-seat, drawing the red curtain around her as she becomes “shrined in double retirement” (9). Whilst the curtain on

the one side closes down her view of the interior, the window to the other side expands her view of the exterior space. Jane narrates: “folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand” whilst on the other side were “clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating me from the drear November day” (9). The transparency of the glass is emphasised against the opacity of the curtains, Jane herself stressing that the physical barrier of the glass does not represent a psychological or perceptual separation between herself and the outdoor world. The reading space which Jane creates parallels the two aspects of her childhood and early adult life: restriction on the one hand – whether at the Reeds’ house, at Lowood or in her role as governess at Thornfield – and protection and vision on the other, anticipating the strength Jane finds through self-nurture as the novel develops. The red curtain offers a protective barrier between Jane and the abusive realm of the Reed drawing-room, and yet also anticipates the oppression of the ‘red-room’, in which Jane is locked up for periods of her childhood (the red-room is introduced at the end of the first chapter, establishing the crucial power dynamics that preside in Gateshead Hall). Jane’s reading space is a clearly demarcated one in which she can enjoy her book: “With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my way” (11), but this haven is only temporary, for her reading is soon interrupted by the Reed children. Given that we are told the cruel John Reed has little insight – “he was not quick either of vision or conception” (11) – and therefore does not discover Jane’s hiding space without the help of his sister, the capacity for vision, both ocular and mental, is established at this early stage in the novel as an indicator of strength of character; it is also implicitly connected with the act of reading. With the outside world in view, Jane’s reading space becomes an expansive rather than a curtailed one, a creative realm for the imagination and a crucial counter-space to the oppressive Reed drawing-room.

Jane’s solitary reading in a protected area is akin to the reading activity depicted in *The Last Chapter*, as both readers exercise a command, albeit a temporary one, over their space and reading experience. The composure and positioning of Martineau’s reader suggest that she is not addicted or ‘dragged’ to her knees, as Losano suggests, but

empowered, seeking out satisfaction in not merely sought out but created spaces, as did Jane. The three realms of space I have identified in *The Last Chapter* (interior, exterior and imagined) are evident in Brontë's account of Jane's reading: the physical space Jane has created in which to read, the outside space which remains visible to her (and the reader) and the imagined space conjured up through her reading, with the window serving in both to act simultaneously as an arena for the reader's imagination and as a trope for contemplation. Significantly, other fictional readers enjoy the interplay of similar spaces. George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) lived in a "triple world of reality, books and waking dreams" (367). A consideration of the similarities between Brontë's and Martineau's reader draws attention to the significance of space, both literal and metaphorical, for these imagined women readers. To return to the composition of Martineau's painting, whilst, as mentioned, the close focus on the single figure was becoming increasingly common in Pre-Raphaelite-influenced works of the 1860s, it is perhaps no accident that the first of Martineau's compositions to utilise this focus is of a woman reader. The close focus generates the impression of the woman's reading-time being snatched, taking place in whatever space the reader could create for herself. The reader may (or may not) have the rest of the room at her disposal but has chosen this corner, by the fireplace, exercising command not over the entire room but over the corner she has temporarily occupied. Both Brontë's and Martineau's readers adopt temporary reading poses in makeshift spaces, creating moments in which the status quo – domestic abuse for Jane and presumably familial or at least uxorial duties for Martineau's reader – is arrested.

In working towards a conclusion of my discussion of *The Last Chapter*, I wish to consider the title of the painting. It would seem significant that the artist has chosen to depict the reader nearing the end of her book. It appears to have been more common to picture women at this stage of their reading than at any other point. For example, Albert Moore's *The End of the Story* (1877) pictures a reader who looks up and off into the distance contemplatively as she nears the end of her book. In Burne-Jones' series of paintings, *The*

Seasons (1869-70), it is the culminating figure of Winter who reads a book, again suggesting a connection between reading and finality. Perhaps representing the reader approaching the end of a book allowed for greater scope to imply the type of mental journey and psychic spaces which reading can offer. From Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 350 BCE) came the pervasive model of texts having a specific meaning conveyed through a beginning, middle and end (Jasper 18). Whilst the beginning of the reading process could potentially signify a journey yet to be undertaken, it appears to have been approaching the end of a book that offered the most metaphorical appeal. In *The Mill on the Floss* Maggie is a resistant reader and refuses to finish *Corinne* because she rejects its love-plot.¹⁴ Finishing a book is therefore a significant process. In fact, the *Macmillan's Magazine* reviewer was disappointed that Moore's *The End of the Story* offered no such evidence of the journey of the reader:

Such a title naturally excites our interest; we expect to see in the expression of the figure something that may suggest to our imagination the nature of the story and of its effect on the reader. But Mr. Moore gives us nothing of this. (Stratham 117)

Books may also be seen as metaphors for life in general; it is no coincidence that the tropes of chapters and pages are used when describing instances in human life. G. H. Lewes drew on such metaphors in his review of *Jane Eyre*, claiming that it "reads like a page out of one's life" (692). In *The Last Chapter* we seem to be witness, therefore, to the end point of a journey made by the reader; one that, as I have suggested, is registered across the details of the canvas rather than in a clearly projected and foreclosed narrative. However, approaching the end of the book does not necessarily signify resolution. Davis poses the questions a reader may be left with on finishing a book: "What are we to do with books when they are finished? How do they stand to the life around them?" (xiii). He suggests that although finished, the act of reading is "paradoxically ... incomplete: 'Then

what?” (7). Considered in this light, far from symbolising closure, the nearing of the end of the book in Martineau’s painting leaves the reader – and the viewer – in an ambiguous position; unlike Egg’s poor Balzac reader, we do not know what will become of her.

In conclusion, in focusing on the issue of space in *The Last Chapter*, I have attempted to demonstrate that Martineau’s painting offers a striking visual figuration of the importance of space in women’s reading processes. In *Past and Present* the Balzac book is a signifying object in a scheme of visual codes which creates a moralising narrative. By contrast, in *The Last Chapter* the book is a device, offering to its reader an opportunity to create pleasurable and empowering spaces, a process familiar to us from readers in nineteenth-century fiction. Whilst textual examples of resisting readers are not uncommon, *The Last Chapter* is unusual as a visual representation of a reader who seems to assert selfhood at a time when most visually depicted women readers face a punishing fate or are the subject of an eroticized gaze. To describe this as an image ‘of’ a particular kind of reader misses the point as it fails to attend to the much more ambitious and imaginative attempt that Martineau has made to visually render an experience of reading. The problem is not what the figure is reading but how we should read the picture when the potential visual and textual signifiers of pictures on the wall, sheet music and book are not legible to us. Arguably the painting offers a rich reading experience in itself and suggests to us that in examining images of women readers we should do more than interpret them against taxonomies of women readers created by contemporary discourses and should also attend to their specifically visual dynamics.

List of illustrations:

1. Robert Braithwaite Martineau, *The Last Chapter*, 1863, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery.
2. Robert Campin, *Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen*, c. 1440, National Gallery, London
3. Pieter Pourbus, *Epitaph of Soyer van Marle* (d. 1578), St Jacobskerk, Bruges.
4. Rogier van der Weyden, *Magdalen Reading*, c. 1435, National Gallery, London.

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Notes

I thank Joan Gibbons for her supervision of this piece in its original form as a chapter of my MA thesis ('Images of Women Readers in Victorian Painting', University of Central England, 2001). More recently I am very grateful to Shearer West, Jenny Graham, Richard Clay, Graeme Smart and Rachel Cowgill for their reading and comments on the draft and to Jenny Graham for making available to me parts of her PhD thesis. Thanks also go to the anonymous reader of *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* who made pertinent comments about an earlier version of this essay.

¹ Stewart identifies this practice as being in keeping with Ruskin's theories of naturalism. In "Of Turnerian Mystery: - First, as Essential", one of the exercises in naturalism that Ruskin apparently suggests is to stand back from a bookcase and draw the titles only as they appear to the eye, that is with the print being visible but not legible (Stewart 224).

² See my article (2008) on Ruskin's advice concerning women's reading.

³ Others take Flint's interpretation as the basis of their discussion, for example, Losano (31). Casteras ('Beware') also suggests the woman may be reading sensation fiction but her account appears to derive from Flint's.

⁴ The work also appears on the front cover of both James Secord's Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of "Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation" (2001) and Pamela K. Gilbert's Disease, Desire, and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels (1997).

⁵ See Maunder, vol. 1, and Flint, Chapter Ten, for a discussion of sensation fiction.

⁶ My thanks go to Richard Clay for drawing my attention to this specific work. Another upright and virtuous reader can be seen in Victor Orsel's *Le Bien et le Mal* (1832).

⁷ St Catherine, the patron saint of learning and education, was also sometimes pictured reading.

⁸ On the subject of the Pre-Raphaelites' knowledge of Early Netherlandish painting, see Jenny Graham's PhD thesis. The *Virgin and Child Before a Firescreen* was not publicly exhibited until 1882 (in Brussels) and was not in London until 1892 (Campbell 92) but the Van der Weyden Magdalene had entered the National Gallery in 1860 (Campbell 398; Foister 3) and could therefore have easily been seen by Martineau. Following an exhibition in Manchester in 1857 of Flemish masters, the National Gallery acquired around twenty Flemish works throughout the 1860s by artists such as Campin, Van Eyck and Van der Weyden (Landow). It is likely Hunt would have studied such paintings, for example *The Virgin and Child with an Angel* by Hans Memlinc, acquired by the National Gallery in 1862, as well as engravings and woodcuts at the British Museum Print Room (Landow) and there is every possibility that Martineau would also have known about them.

⁹ For example Helen Martineau (99), Robin Ironside and John Gere (27) and James Harding (41). See my 2009 essay for an overview of Martineau's work.

¹⁰ Thanks go to Richard Clay for helping me to crystallise this point.

¹¹ See Humphreys for a nineteenth-century discussion of the domestic library.

¹² See Radway (54).

¹³ The book was published in 1797-1804. Taylor notes that the Brontë family owned the 1816 edition of the book from which the children made various copies of the engravings (5). Charlotte Brontë's earliest surviving drawing (1829) is a copy of one of the engravings in the book (Taylor 6). Taylor discusses further the parallels between Bewick's text and the unfolding narrative of *Jane Eyre*.

¹⁴ See Golden, Chapter 3, for a full discussion of Maggie's reading.