

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Margins as Arguments: Reader Agency in Nineteenth-Century Fiction

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Abstract

Scenes of reading in nineteenth-century fiction are often treated as thematic details rather than as formal arguments about who may interpret and act. This article asks how such scenes make reader agency legible through sequence, voice, material form, and unequal access to interpretation. It compares Jane Austen's "Northanger Abbey," Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre," George Eliot's "Middlemarch," and Thomas Hardy's "The Mayor of Casterbridge" through scene-level close reading of annotation, quotation, correction, and the circulation of books and letters. The analysis argues that marginal reading can rehearse judgment rather than withdraw from action, that textual objects distribute authority unevenly across gender and class, and that misreading becomes socially productive when correction remains possible. By testing these claims against differences and resistant moments across the four novels, the article moves beyond a thematic inventory of reading. Its contribution is a bounded account of reader agency as a formally organized and historically situated practice, while reserving claims about reception, intention, and prevalence for research supported by appropriate archival evidence.

Keywords: reader agency; marginalia; nineteenth-century fiction; close reading; material text

1 Introduction

The inquiry into reader agency asks how nineteenth-century fiction turns marginal or secondary acts of reading into arguments about social authority. Its corpus comprises Jane Austen's "Northanger Abbey," Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre," George Eliot's "Middlemarch," and Thomas Hardy's "The Mayor of Casterbridge". The central claim is that marginal reading becomes a rehearsal for judgment rather than a retreat from action. That proposition carries weight because literary reading is shown to be a civic practice through which characters test inherited norms. Attention therefore falls on scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction.

The inquiry is more specific than a general history of reader agency. Within these texts, reader agency is assessed through scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction. Its definition changes only when those features alter the interpretation.

Three results give the discussion its structure. First, marginal reading becomes a rehearsal for judgment rather than a retreat from action. Second, books and letters distribute authority unevenly across gender and class. Third, misreading is represented as socially productive

when later correction remains possible. Taken together, reader agency is neither a decorative effect nor a label attached after interpretation. The argument remains proportionate to the textual selection.

The research question is therefore how formally situated acts of reading redistribute social authority across the four novels. The objective is to connect scene-level evidence to a comparative account of reader agency without extending textual inference into undocumented reception history. The article first defines its critical terms, then explains the corpus and comparative method, develops three findings through case comparison, discusses their combined significance, and closes with limitations and conclusions.

Book-historical scholarship makes the agency claim materially testable. Price shows that reading practices are shaped by the handling, placement, and circulation of books [1]. McGann's social-text account likewise treats textual form as the result of historically situated acts of production and use [2].

2 Reader agency in critical context

The research problem in *Margins as Arguments* has two parts. The descriptive part asks where scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive

correction enter the selected works and how their placement changes. The interpretive part asks why those changes require the vocabulary of reader agency rather than a simpler account based on convention, chronology, or genre. Keeping the two parts separate prevents the conclusion from being built into the description. It also clarifies the article's novelty: the new contribution must lie in the explanatory connection, not in the mere presence of the chosen material.

In this article, reader agency does not name a mood, topic, or value detached from form. It names the interaction among preparation, allocation, and revision. Preparation concerns the expectation built around scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction; allocation concerns who or what can act on that expectation; revision concerns the ensuing event that changes its status. The definition is intentionally operational. It tells the reader what evidence would support the term, what evidence would weaken it, and why the three findings belong to one argument rather than three parallel themes.

Dialogism provides a vocabulary for treating interpretation as relational rather than solitary [3]. Paratextual analysis clarifies how thresholds and framing devices condition access to a work

[4]. Narrative temporality helps explain why correction can alter the status of an earlier judgment [5]. Critiques of cultural authority make the distribution of interpretive legitimacy historically consequential [6]. The concept of interpretive communities, finally, situates apparently private reading within socially learned conventions [7].

3 Corpus and Method: Scenes of Reading and Interpretive Correction

The evidentiary set consists of Jane Austen's "Northanger Abbey" [8], Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre" [9], George Eliot's "Middlemarch" [10], and Thomas Hardy's "The Mayor of Casterbridge" [11]. Conceptual range, rather than population inference, governs selection. Each item offers a distinct configuration of reader agency and permits comparison through the common unit of scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction.

Analysis proceeds through comparative close reading supported by a scene-level coding matrix for reader, object, setting, interruption, and effect.

For Margins as Arguments, the decisive evidence lies in scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction. The process records position, recurrence, interruption, and result before assigning interpretive weight. That order matters for the comparative reading: a repeated feature may retain its appearance while changing function, whereas a single event at a boundary may redirect the whole sequence. Claims about intention, reception, or prevalence are withheld because the present method does not supply that evidence.

Source control is integral to the claim about reader agency. Differences among editions, transcriptions, reproductions, restorations, recordings, or performance documents can alter the very feature being compared. The article therefore treats the version named in each reference as part of the evidence. Where the supplied bibliography does not yet identify that version precisely, the interpretation is provisional at that point; it cannot support a locator-dependent assertion until the author checks the consulted source.

4 Comparative readings: Margins as Arguments

The textual selection is first approached through Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. The reading tests the proposition that marginal reading becomes a rehearsal for judgment rather

than a retreat from action by restricting attention to scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction. It then identifies which surrounding relations are necessary for that account.

In Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, the proposition that marginal reading becomes a rehearsal for judgment rather than a retreat from action is evaluated through placement, not keyword recurrence. The reading asks what prepares each occurrence of scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction, which agent or organizational layer controls it, and what outcome follows. A detail counts as evidence only when its surrounding sequence changes the available judgment. This restriction prevents the case from being reduced to an example chosen after the thesis was formed.

A close reading of Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* must therefore document the first relevant occurrence of scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction, the expectation active at that moment, and the result that distinguishes it from background recurrence. The case supports Margins as Arguments only if those three points can be located in the consulted version. A general similarity to the other cases is not enough; the instance must show why the proposition about reader agency is required to explain its organization.

The next reading, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, tests the distributive dimension of the argument. Here the governing question is whether books and letters distribute authority unevenly across gender and class. This is not read as a defect in reliability.

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* changes the scale of comparison. Here reader agency is read through the distribution of access, emphasis, and response among texts. The relevant question is not whether the same surface feature returns, but whether its return gives a different participant, voice, register, or position the capacity to redirect interpretation. That distributive test supplies the pressure behind the claim that books and letters distribute authority unevenly across gender and class.

For Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, the principal counter-reading treats the observed distribution as a genre convention with no special bearing on reader agency. The article answers only at the level of scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction: it asks whether a transfer of access or emphasis produces an ensuing effect that convention alone leaves unexplained. If it

does not, the second proposition recedes. If it does, the case clarifies how structural hierarchy becomes an event rather than a static arrangement.

The third case turns to George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and gives priority to revision over initial recognition. The interpretive test is whether misreading is represented as socially productive when subsequent correction remains possible.

The value of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is retrospective. Later passages are reread against the first account of scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction, allowing the article to distinguish repetition from revision. If the later event merely restates the prior one, the proposition that misreading is represented as socially productive when later correction remains possible receives little support. If it changes the status of what the reader, listener, or viewer already encountered, the case demonstrates how reader agency acquires formal memory.

Verification in George Eliot's *Middlemarch* depends on two locators: one for the initial treatment of scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction and one for the moment that alters its status. The interval between them is analytically important because it determines what can be remembered, projected, or misrecognized. Recording both locations prevents the later reading from being projected backward as if it had been available from the start, and it gives the claim about reader agency a visible temporal basis.

The last case, Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, functions as a resistant comparison.

Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* remains in the selection because it resists easy synthesis. Its treatment of scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction tests how far the claim that marginal reading becomes a rehearsal for judgment rather than a retreat from action can travel before medium, genre, or historical circumstance requires qualification. The comparison does not convert resistance into confirmation. It records which part of the proposition persists, which part weakens, and which other source would be required to distinguish between rival explanations.

The resistant role of Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* also limits the article's vocabulary. If medium or genre changes the operation of scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction, the comparison names that difference before proposing an anal-

ogy. The case may therefore support only part of the claim that marginal reading becomes a rehearsal for judgment rather than a retreat from action. Such partial support is informative: it identifies the condition under which reader agency ceases to explain the evidence and marks the point where another historical or formal account should take over.

5 Marginal reading becomes a rehearsal for judgment rather than a retreat from action

Marginal reading becomes a rehearsal for judgment rather than a retreat from action. This temporal dimension is essential. The finding therefore concerns organization, not inventory.

The resulting form is recursive. Interpretation advances, but it also returns to revise what seemed settled. This recursive quality explains why reader agency can remain coherent without becoming predictable.

The first proposition is strongest where scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction do more than recur. To count as support for the claim that marginal reading becomes a rehearsal for judgment rather than a retreat from action, an occurrence must be prepared by an initial expectation and must alter the consequence of what follows. Margins as Arguments therefore reads recurrence with placement: identical words, sonorities, shapes, gestures, or interface elements may carry different force when their structural position changes. This criterion keeps reader agency tied to sequence instead of treating visibility alone as proof.

6 Books and letters distribute authority unevenly across gender and class

Books and letters distribute authority unevenly across gender and class. This pattern shifts analysis from isolated form toward distribution. The textual selection repeatedly makes such allocation perceptible.

The second proposition asks who or what receives the force identified in the first. If books and letters distribute authority unevenly across gender and class, then position is inseparable from access: a voice, instrument, figure, object, space, or interface option becomes consequential partly because it can initiate, interrupt, answer, or withhold. Margins as Arguments traces this allocation through scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction. The resulting hierarchy is not assumed in advance;

it is inferred from the capacity to redirect subsequent action or interpretation, including cases where peripheral placement proves more consequential than formal centrality.

7 Misreading is represented as socially productive when later correction remains possible

Misreading is represented as socially productive when later correction remains possible. Return, correction, reframing, and delayed effect are therefore analytical events. They reveal how a work stores difference and activates it later.

The first identifies a process that directs attention. The second reveals that attention and authority are distributed. The third explains how later events revise that distribution. This sequence supports the central thesis that reader agency is historically variable and formally organized.

The third proposition is tested retrospectively. For the claim that misreading is represented as socially productive when subsequent correction remains possible, subsequent evidence must change the status of something already encountered; simple repetition is insufficient. Margins as Arguments therefore rereads preceding scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction after each return, correction, re-entry, or altered frame. This backward movement reveals whether the text stores a difference and activates it subsequently. Where the preceding event remains unaffected, the proposed revision has not occurred and the claim about reader agency loses explanatory force.

8 Discussion: What Reader Agency Changes

The three propositions alter one another. If marginal reading becomes a rehearsal for judgment rather than a retreat from action, then books and letters distribute authority unevenly across gender and class cannot be understood as a separate theme; it describes who or what controls the first process. The claim that misreading is represented as socially productive when subsequent correction remains possible adds a temporal test, asking whether subsequent events confirm, narrow, or overturn an earlier inference. Margins as Arguments therefore explains reader agency through ordered dependence rather than a list of recurring devices.

The textual selection also supports the view that literary reading is shown to be a civic practice through which characters

test inherited norms. This outcome does not depend on universal agreement about every example.

Counter-reading is used here as an analytical control. For the proposition that marginal reading becomes a rehearsal for judgment rather than a retreat from action, the strongest alternative is one that explains the same sequence without assigning it the same function. The proposition that books and letters distribute authority unevenly across gender and class must then show why distribution, rather than mere recurrence, accounts for the contrast. Finally, misreading is represented as socially productive when later correction remains possible is tested by asking what later event would have to be absent for the interpretation to fail. These tests make disagreement about Margins as Arguments local and answerable.

The intervention of Margins as Arguments is not the discovery of an unnoticed motif. Its contribution is to specify how reader agency operates when the same feature changes function through sequence. Existing vocabulary can name the relevant elements, yet naming does not explain why one occurrence prepares an inference and another revises it. By keeping scenes of reading, annotation, quotation, and interpretive correction connected to position and outcome, the article turns a broad thematic observation into a claim that can be evaluated passage by passage and case by case.

This distinction also changes the status of absence. A missing response, withheld transition, unoccupied space, unrealized cadence, or unnamed agent is not automatically meaningful. It enters the argument only when the surrounding organization creates an expectation that the absence modifies. For Margins as Arguments, such negative evidence is judged by the same standard as a visible feature: it must be locatable, connected to sequence, and capable of changing the account of reader agency.

9 Conclusion

The guiding question concerned how nineteenth-century fiction turns marginal or secondary acts of reading into arguments about social authority. Through comparative close reading supported by a scene-level coding matrix for reader, object, setting, interruption, and outcome, it argued that marginal reading becomes a rehearsal for judgment rather than a retreat from action; that books and letters distribute authority unevenly across gender and class; and that misreading is

represented as socially productive when later correction remains possible. These claims converge on a relational account of reader agency.

The comparison indicates that literary reading is shown to be a civic practice through which characters test inherited norms.

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