“Preaching’s his business … He’s in our employ, and we pays [sic] him well”.1 In Margaret Oliphant’s *Salem Chapel* (1863), a young dissenting minister finds his aspirations to compose well-researched and well-wrought sermons foiled both by his congregation’s inability to appreciate his often obscure references as well as by his own social ambitions. In order to please an “audience” that pays him and hence believes that it owns him, he feels compelled to write for effect. It is a humiliating experience that is detailed with sympathy – a sympathy primarily premised on a metaphorical alignment of professional preaching with the production of popular fiction. Both are shown to be at the mercy of an increasingly competitive marketplace that can be detrimental to the writer’s and the preacher’s vocation. In “the bloom of hope and intellectualism, a young man of the newest school”, Arthur Vincent is disappointed by the “[g]reengrocers, dealers in cheese and bacon, milkmen, with some dress-makers of inferior pretensions, and teachers of day-schools of similar humble character, [that] formed the elite of the congregation”.2 His attempts to break into more fashionable social circles, claimed at least nominally by the town’s High Church clergy, map the shifting class-alignments of religious communities in Victorian Britain. If this generates chiefly a social panorama of doctrinal differences, it all the more emphatically pinpoints the very pervasiveness of religion as a central aspect of daily life and a pervasive theme in the literature of the time. As it thereby evinces the ready availability of the sermon for discourses on popularity at large, *Salem Chapel* offers a peculiarly insightful point-of-entry into a much needed reassessment of fictional engagements with the sermon in the Victorian novel.

The divergent ways of achieving popularity are pivotal to the novel’s narrativization of pervasive anxieties about both prestige and integrity. Vincent refuses to cater to consumer demands. As a result, he fails to

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2 Ibid., pp. 3, 2.
adjust to the social requirements of his position, to meet the needs of his flock. Their treatment of the preacher “in their employ” of course sharpens the satire at the expense of all sides. This is not only because his repugnance at the thought of serving in a “preaching shop, where his success was to be measured by the seat-letting, and his soul decanted out into periodical issue under the seal of Tozer & Co”, is invested with particular sympathy in its identification with the equivalent struggles faced by the popular writer. While illustrating the divisiveness between divergent denominations of Christianity in Victorian Britain, what remains at the heart of the social panorama is a fondly satirical mapping of provincial society.

An additional edge, however, is given to the representation of popularity in the integration of sensational elements in the narrative itself. Divorce, kidnapping, and murder, first introduced in a cursory subplot, upstage Vincent’s writing problems. This bifurcation in the plot structure is the result of Oliphant’s endeavor to boost her own sinking sales figures. Despite her insistent criticism of the sensation genre, she injects some of its most effective devices into her *Carlingford* series, realist narratives of domestic, provincial life. This move indicates both the complexity of market forces and the author’s self-conscious awareness of them. So far from distracting from the main plot, with its emphasis on the eponymous Salem Chapel and its minister, the infiltration of the sensational literalizes his oscillation between sensation’s allure and the integrity of his work.

The self-reflexivity with which sermons are evoked in Victorian fiction, in fact, underscores a linkage between the sermon and fiction that articulates variously interlinked concerns. Before analyzing specific texts in more detail, I shall therefore first situate the fictional functions of sermons within representations of religion in Victorian literature. A juxtaposition of still largely ignored non-canonical religious fiction on the one hand and the much better known satires of sermons in

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3 Ibid., p. 48.
4 Joseph O’Mealy argues that Oliphant’s reevaluative parodies were aimed to “set aside a rival’s vision of reality, [as] a forum for getting back at her literary rivals” (“Rewriting Trollope and Yonge; Mrs Oliphant’s Phoebe Junior and the Realism Wars,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 39.2 [1997], 125). If *Salem Chapel* appropriated sensational elements, *Phoebe Junior* (1876) reasserted Oliphant’s “mastery of the genre that had become identified no longer with George Eliot, whose range had greatly expanded beyond the Dissenting interest, but increasingly with Anthony Trollope and Charlotte Yonge” (p. 127).