# INTRODUCTION

## Ancient Paradigms in Modern Conflicts

"WE MAY QUICKLY EXCEED a mediocrity, even in the praise of Mediocrity," cautioned John Donne in a 1625 sermon.[1] With a destabilizing paradox, Donne invoked the venerable norm of "mediocrity" or the "golden mean" to warn his contemporaries against the danger of overuse. Twenty-first-century readers might well conclude that early modern authors, including Donne, celebrated the mean to excess. Yet, as his admonition suggests, the mean was not only a cultural commonplace but also a source of controversy.

This book studies English literary representations of means and extremes from the late sixteenth to the late seventeenth century. Classical in origin, the notion of a virtuous mean between two vicious extremes figured crucially in the writings of educated early modern English authors. Historians and literary scholars have studied the concept's importance for the period's struggles concerning the national church and the constitution. This study is the first, however, to examine a broad variety of literary treatments of the mean-extremes polarity as representations of major cultural tensions extending far beyond—though often related to—ecclesiological and constitutional conflicts. Early modern authors apply the schema to numerous aspects of personal and collective life in innovative, surprising, and contentious ways. Writers not only construct highly original versions of the mean; they also advocate various extremes.

Donne himself transforms the classical mean to promote individual freedom, while the aggressively modern Francis Bacon holds extremism necessary for human empowerment. Erotic literature pits extreme passion against temperate conjugal love; symposiastic or drinking-party poetry extols polemically defined norms of sociable moderation or of intoxicating excess. Imagining a modern rival to ancient Rome, georgic poets laud the nation as the embodiment of the golden mean, warn against national excesses, or urge extreme ways of increasing the nation's power and wealth. Challenging his predecessors' and contemporaries' erotic, symposiastic, and georgic writings, John Milton deploys the mean to celebrate ideals of pleasurable restraint and self-respect that his countrymen have ignored to their peril. Such literary adaptations and transformations of an ancient opposition figure centrally in the emergence of a deeply divided, ambivalent, yet self-consciously modern English culture. In both conspicuous and subtle ways, furthermore, these clashing treatments of means and extremes continue to resonate within contemporary cultural debates.

## The Classical Mean in Early Modern England

The social and intellectual elite of early modern England often espoused Aristotle's definition, most fully developed in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, of ethical virtues as habits that preserve a mean between excess and deficiency in actions and emotions. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as in the medieval period, Aristotle's works remained the core of the university curriculum. Accompanied by various medieval and early modern commentaries and epitomes, the *Nicomachean Ethics* was the major university text in ethics.[2] Numerous Latin translations made the work accessible to those with little Greek.[3] Cicero's *De officiis*, which invokes the "mean" ("mediocritas") and the closely associated notion of proper "measure" ("modus") to detail the behavior of the ideal Roman gentleman (1.25.89, 1.29.102–104, 1.35.129–1.39.140), was frequently reprinted both in Latin and in English translations. Taught in grammar schools as well, it was often treated as a more accessible companion to the *Nicomachean Ethics*.[4]

Recent scholars have drawn renewed attention to the powerful Stoic strands in early modern English thought.[5] Yet English authors frequently preferred Aristotelian "mediocrity" to the Stoic ideal of wholly extirpating the emotions. Mixing Aristotelianism with Augustine's famous critique of Stoicism (*De civitate dei* 9.5, 14.8–9), numerous writers argue that one should, for example, feel the appropriate amount of anger or pity toward a fellow human being, neither too much nor too little, rather than seek an apathy impossible in practice as well as inhumane and un-Christian as an ideal.[6] Taking up an ancient theme (Cicero, *De finibus* 5.8.22; Plutarch, *Moralia* 449a–c; Augustine, *De civitate dei* 14.9), early modern defenders of Stoicism also often minimized its differences from Aristotelianism by characterizing them as merely terminological in order to claim that Stoics, like Aristotelians, called for regulating rather than eliminating emotions. The eclecticism of Seneca, the most widely read and influential ancient Stoic, encouraged such a view. While often arguing in traditional Stoic fashion that passions were incapable of moderation and therefore must be extirpated, Seneca also claimed that virtue is in all things a mean between excess and deficiency (*De beneficiis* 2.16.2).[7]

Other widely read and admired classical authors of an eclectic philosophical bent, like Horace and Plutarch, offered nontechnical discussions and representations of the Aristotelian notion. These ancient authors encouraged early modern syncretism by associating the mean with values originally quite foreign to it, such as (in Horace's case) Epicurean hedonism.[8] Drawing on multiple pagan sources, various church fathers, including the vastly influential Augustine, invoked the mean as an ethical norm, treating virtues such as courage and liberality as means between excess and deficiency and calling for Aristote-

lian temperance with regard to bodily appetites. While simultaneously using and distrusting the Catholic Scholastics' Aristotelian formulations, English Protestants found in the church fathers purer assurance of the mean's compatibility with Christian faith.[9]

Early modern English authors of different religious, political, and social commitments and backgrounds often espouse the mean as a norm for everyday life. "The golden mean is best" is one of numerous sixteenth- and seventeenth-century proverbs in this vein.[10] Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers frequently extol "moderation," often equated with the Aristotelian mean.[11] The popularity of books on courtesy and manners, both homegrown and translated from continental sources, attests to the massive early modern concern with the regulation of behavior.[12] Influenced by Aristotle, Seneca, and especially Cicero, such works invoke the mean as a guide to well-nigh every aspect of gentle behavior.[13] Heavily indebted to Aristotelian notions, Protestant ministers and Galenic doctors alike preach the mean in conjugal love and sexual activity, diet, labor and recreation.[14] Though in tension with their professed zeal in God's cause, university-trained Puritan ministers resemble their more high church brethren in treating the Aristotelian mean as a norm for daily behavior in the world.[15]

Such extensive invocation of the mean as a norm, however, does not establish a homogeneous national culture among the educated elite, whether conceived of according to an old literary historicist Tillyardian model of a shared "world picture," an (early) new historicist model based upon a Foucauldian episteme or Geertzian seamless "culture," or the revisionist political historians' model of fundamental ideological consensus.[16] For one thing, widespread protestations that the mean was best entailed little agreement concerning how the principle was to be construed or deployed.

The mean is indeed a quintessential example of what post-Wittgensteinian philosophers call a "fuzzy" concept, whose borders are hard to define.[17] Aristotle, who emphasizes from the outset that ethical theory is perforce inexact in its general formulations and even more sketchy regarding particular cases of conduct, claims that it is difficult and rare to discern the virtuous mean (*NE* 2.2.3–5, 2.6.13–14, 2.9.1–2). He argues that because the mean is greater than vicious deficiency and less than vicious excess, a brave man appears reckless to a coward and appears cowardly to a reckless one. Furthermore, since one extreme is closer to the mean than the other (e.g., recklessness is closer to courage than cowardice), the extreme closest to the mean in particular displays a potentially deceptive "likeness" [*homoiotês*] to virtue (*NE* 2.8.1–8). In a circular argument that reveals the full—and avowed—imprecision of his central concept, Aristotle identifies the mean in any given circumstance as what the "prudent man" [*phronimos*], that is, the man who reasons correctly concerning what is proper to do and feel, would determine it to be (*NE* 2.6.15, 6.1.1, 6.5.1–3).[18] It is consequently not surprising, to take one example, that

widespread early modern exhortations that one should observe the mean in mourning for the dead—avoiding both excessive grief and inhuman, Stoic insensibility—left intense disagreement among English moral guides about precisely how much mourning was appropriate.[19]

More significantly, the mean's imprecision encouraged polemical manipulation and aroused hermeneutic suspicion. In his *Rhetoric*, when he is concerned with rhetorical efficacy rather than ethical discernment, Aristotle himself notes that the panegyrist should praise men's excesses as if they were the proximate virtuous means (1.9.28–29). Many ancient and early modern writers either laud or—more frequently—decry the ability of sophisticated speakers or social groups (courtiers were a favorite early modern instance) to denigrate virtuous means as their proximate extremes and to exalt proximate vices as virtuous means.[20] The ideal of the mean thus became an intense source of conflict.

## The Mean in Early Modern Religious and Political Controversies

The vagueness of the mean was both extremely evident and deeply troubling when extended beyond the Aristotelian list of virtues and opposing vices, where broad agreement existed about the general definitions—though not specific applications—to fundamentally contested areas of communal experience. The most conspicuous early modern disagreements concerning the proper understanding and application of the mean revolve around conceptions of the national church and constitution, the two central and interrelated sources of intense conflicts throughout the early modern period. Because these arguments form a crucial context for the literary and cultural developments foregrounded in this book, I will briefly discuss three aspects that are most relevant to my concerns: the dependence upon longstanding traditions of conceptualizing the mean; the malleability of the concept, which permitted its application to new situations and experiences even as it revealed its weakness as a source of consensus; and appeals to values in tension with the mean, which in turn precipitated attempts to reconcile those values with the venerable Aristotelian norm.

Both classical and patristic authors extended the Aristotelian mean to religious belief and practice. Plutarch influentially treated proper religion as a mean between extremes of superstition and atheism. The Cappadocian church fathers and Augustine conflated biblical images of the righteous "way" with the Aristotelian mean in order to define orthodox Christianity as a virtuous mean or "middle way" [*mesê hodos*, *via media*] between opposite heresies.[21] Drawing upon such formulations, the major rival churches of the Reformation promoted themselves as the virtuous "middle way" between (variously described) extremes.[22] Early modern Englishmen similarly applied the notion of

the Aristotelian mean to identify the national church as a *via media* between "popery" or Roman Catholicism and "extreme" Protestantism.

English espousals of the *via media* concealed numerous disagreements concerning the formula's precise meaning. Members of the national church disagreed as to what constituted the "extreme" Protestantism ranged on the other side of "popery" (Anabaptism? English Presbyterianism? Genevan Calvinism?), which extreme was furthest from the mean, and what the most relevant criteria were for distinguishing the mean from the extremes (ceremonial practice? ecclesiastical structure? dogma?). The fluidity of the concept helps explain how the English church could be hailed by so many of its members as the *via media* from the late Elizabethan period through the Restoration even as it changed from a largely Calvinist to a largely Arminian church. Disagreements hidden in the vague formulation caused conflicts within the church between Puritans desiring further "reformation" and anti-Puritan conformists during the Elizabethan and Jacobean period and between Arminians and their opponents during the Jacobean and Caroline periods. These erupted into civil war in the mid-seventeenth century and continued to divide the church between high church and latitudinarian factions during the later seventeenth century. To muddy the middle path further, many Protestant opponents of the national church from the Elizabethan period through the Restoration, including both Presbyterians and Independents, claimed that they, rather than the errant established church, represented the middle way between "popery" and Protestant extremism.[23] Given the conflicting senses of the *via media*, literary historians have rightly emphasized the need for careful interpretation of the *particular* position of such complex literary professions of the *via media* as, for example, George Herbert's lyric "The British Church." Elsewhere I have explored Donne's highly self-conscious positioning of the English church in his sermons, which draws upon various classical, patristic, and Scholastic formulations to draw polemical distinctions between true and false conceptions of the church's middle way.[24]

Rival claimants to the *via media* regarded and attacked opponents as hypocritical representatives of a vicious extreme by, for example, equating Arminians with papists or Calvinists with sectarians. Many opposed Charles I and proceeded, however reluctantly, into civil war because they viewed the Arminian faction he supported as crypto-papist.[25] Yet the mean was not the only norm of religious debate and controversy. Since it was generally agreed that religious fundamentals were not to be compromised but intensely debated as to what these fundamentals were, zealous defenders of what they deemed "fundamental" reproached self-described moderate opponents for their sinful lack of religious conviction. These opponents were compared to the Laodiceans condemned in Rev. 3:15–16 as "lukewarm . . . neither cold nor hot." For example, in his much-reprinted *A Coal from the Altar* (1615), the Puritan Samuel Ward attacked as Laodiceans those who complacently approved the

state of the church; in "commend[ing] the golden mean" and seeking "the name of a moderate," they lost all proper "zeal." While warning in Aristotelian fashion against "bitter zeale" beyond "moderation," Ward preferred the former to deficient "lukewarmnesse," the worse of the "two extremities."[26] The palpable tension in Ward between Aristotelian norms and Puritan zeal prefigured the mid-seventeenth-century breakdown into opposing religious rhetorics.

As in the vituperative controversy between Joseph Hall and John Milton over episcopacy in the 1640s, debate was often polarized between self-described moderates (like Hall) and "vehement" or zealous opponents to lukewarmness (like Milton).[27] Should zeal trump moderation or vice versa? To avoid this troubling question, some strenuously sought to realign virtuous zeal with the mean, Laodiceanism with extremism. For example, in the heated days of 1642 Thomas Fuller distinguished between a Christian moderation consistent with reasonable zeal and Arminian "lukewarmness" regarding fundamentals of faith. Clarifying his distinction, Fuller redefined lukewarmness as an "immoderate unsettledness" that oscillated between "Papists" and Protestants rather than dwelling virtuously midway between Catholicism and extreme Protestantism. Richard Whitlock, who noted (like Aristotle) that the "Golden Meane" was misconstrued by opposing "Extreams," responded to Interregnum disorder by distinguishing a "Well temper'd Zeale," the virtuous mean, from the deficient extreme of "Lukewarmnesse" with which it was falsely identified by the overzealous.[28]

Similar contestations and reassertions of the virtuous mean emerged in early modern struggles over the constitution, which were closely intertwined with religious controversy. Disparate political factions throughout the period espoused a middle way. Moderation was commonly regarded as the central political virtue, essential to preserving political—and cosmic—order. For the early-seventeenth-century moral essayist William Cornwallis, moderation separated legitimate power from "tyranny" and "temper[ed] . . . the whole frame of the world"; without moderation, "extremes" would "ruine all." Commonplace wisdom held that both monarch and subject should use moderation to preserve the constitutional balance of the royal prerogative and subjects' liberty, a relation conceived of as a vague but normative mean between the extremes of tyranny and anarchy.[29]

The constitutional and religious turmoil of the Exclusion Crisis (1679–1681) arguably witnessed the earliest formation of political parties in the modern sense. Yet both supporters and opponents of Charles II appealed for political moderation and balance even while accusing the other side of extremism—either a republican/sectarian or absolutist/popish variant. To square intense partisanship with the norm of moderation, Tories also distinguished between virtuous moderation and unprincipled compromise by attacking those perceived as insufficiently committed as "trimmers" (a term invented during the Exclusion Crisis as a political analogue of Laodiceans).[30] As literary scholars

have shown, John Dryden's brilliant appeals to the *via media* in support of Charles II's political and religious policies (as well as his attacks on trimming) must be situated within the highly propagandistic rhetorical milieu of the Restoration.[31]

Calls for moderation during the Restoration expressed, sometimes explicitly, the ever-present fear on all sides of renewed civil war. During the civil war and Interregnum, such calls dramatically failed to preserve unity, and it is true, as Nigel Smith demonstrates, that "the middle ground was sacrificed to a series of increasingly confident and opposed views and rhetorics."[32] Yet throughout this period, alongside zealous religious and political positioning, members of the ever-evolving Royalist and Parliamentary camps often appealed to the mean and moderation—and in so doing revealed both how widely accepted a norm it was and how malleable it had become. Both Royalists and Parliamentarians initially appealed to a "mixed" monarchy or properly "tempered" (though differently conceived) constitution that restrained both king and subject from extremes.[33] After the regicide, Parliamentarians of various stripes continued to call for a constitutional balance that avoided extremes of monarchical tyranny and mob rule.[34]

In 1650, for example, Marchamont Nedham associated the political middle way with a republic rather than a mixed monarchy. Positioning the Commonwealth regime as the virtuous mean, he warned against the "tyrannical" rule of a conquering Charles II, on the one hand, and the "license" that is equivalent to "extreme tyranny" of the "multitude," with their "extremes of kindness or cruelty," on the other.[35] With numerous citations of classical and Renaissance authorities, Nedham here invoked the ancient and early modern commonplace that the irrational "multitude," as the Jacobean ethicopolitical writer Robert Dallington put it, "whirled with a . . . violent variation from one extreme to the other" rather than "keep[ing] any meane."[36] This commonplace comported as well with the elitist classical republicanism to which Nedham appealed as with diverse forms of Royalism: the Roman historian Livy, the advocate of republican liberty as a mean between tyranny and anarchic license, famously condemned the "multitude" [*multitu(do)*] as either "a humble slave or a haughty master" that could not "moderately" [*modice*] attain or keep the "mean" [*media*] of liberty (*Ab urbe condita* 24.25.8; trans. modified).

Quentin Skinner has argued that Nedham's contemporary Thomas Hobbes, the most brilliant and most reviled political philosopher of the period, addressed the longstanding laments concerning rhetorical manipulations of the mean by rejecting Aristotle's notion of ethical virtue as a "mediocrity." Hobbes replaced the Aristotelian concept with his own supposedly more accurate identification of virtue with behavior that contributed to peaceful order, which in turn entailed identifying virtue (with minor qualifications) with whatever the sovereign power declared it to be.[37] The conflicting political applications of the mean—and their ultimately violent consequences—make Hobbes's radical

maneuver comprehensible. Yet the dedicatory epistle of *Leviathan* (1651) re-
veals his awareness of the deep-seated appeal as well as the extreme plasticity
of the *via media* that he seeks to eliminate at its Aristotelian roots: while his
treatise promotes absolutism and attacks the generally commended notion of
"mixt Monarchy" as a cause of civil war, the epistle describes his treatise as
placed in the virtuous but vulnerable mean between those that "contend on
one side for too great Liberty, and on the other side for too much Authority."[38]
The political *via media* to which Hobbes alludes as a rhetorical *captatio benevo-
lentiae* outlasted his subsequent forcefully argued case for absolutism.

### Means and Extremes and the Variety of Early Modern Discourses

Outside the polemics over church and state, I shall argue, early modern authors
treat the mean-extremes contrast in even more diverse and contradictory ways.
Working in a variety of genres, they imagine new kinds of means—some idio-
syncratic, some highly influential—unlike those deployed in religious and con-
stitutional debates. They also formulate and frequently embrace various ex-
tremes that defy even the most tendentious construals of moderation invoked
in disputes over the national church and state. While numerous early modern
moralists apply the norm of the mean indifferently to both individuals and
national institutions, some contemporary writers more flexibly deploy the
mean-extremes distinction to explore the complex relationship between the
individual, on the one hand, and national religious and sociopolitical forma-
tions, on the other. They use the mean-extremes polarity to define the freedom
of the individual vis-à-vis religious and social institutions (Donne) or to em-
power the individual seeking fulfillment either in struggle for mastery over or
in isolation from such institutions (Bacon). While exalting zeal over Laodi-
ceanism in his 1640s polemics on church government, in *Paradise Lost* Milton
applies his own ideal of the mean to represent the self-respecting individual
and conjugal pair, rather than the church or state, as the proper locus of na-
tional values. Georgics and georgic-influenced poems exalt an ideal national
representative who embodies the golden mean but whose identity is contested
(is he farmer, poet, or king?). Authors proclaim as virtuously moderate or admi-
rably excessive erotic and homosocial pleasures condemned by conventional
moralists. Writers also promote new activities, such as Baconian scientific in-
vestigation, with their own rules regarding means and extremes. Thus, early
modern English authors deploy the mean to express clashing understandings
of themselves—their labors, pleasures, passions, and national identities.

   Niklas Luhmann has characterized the complexity of modern societies in
terms of relatively autonomous discursive "systems." Luhmann argues that the
modern period, broadly defined, witnesses an increasing move from sociopolit-
ical stratification based on multifunctional institutions such as the state and

family to functional differentiation, in which social actors participate in a diverse set of partially autonomous systems (e.g., political, religious, economic, erotic, scientific). Each of these is for Luhmann a discourse, a system of communication dependent upon specialized terms and modes of analysis.[39] Some historians of early modern England support this general view. While religious controversy and national politics were continually intertwined during the period (and beyond), C. Johan Sommerville charts a powerful albeit uneven process of secularization in early modern England. He argues that religious faith did not decline; rather, the period witnessed a "growing differentiation of religious symbols and institutions" from other areas of English society and culture. Susan Amussen similarly explores the development of conflicting norms of manly behavior during the early modern period out of distinctive and "context-specific" religious and secular "codes."[40]

On several counts I will take issue with Luhmann's particular application of his argument to erotic discourse during the early modern period. His approach nevertheless illuminates the period's deployments of means and extremes to articulate the distinct norms of specific domains of personal and collective life. It might appear paradoxical to analyze the mean-extremes contrast, found in so many different contexts, in terms of distinctive discourses, especially since authors often invoke the concept precisely in order to analogize between various aspects of life, all of which demand moderation. Yet writers also employ the mean-extremes polarity in strikingly disparate ways in different contexts. With varying degrees of self-consciousness, they treat persons as participants in diverse subsystems with distinctive standards and rules. Bacon, for example, applies means and extremes differently when he considers persons as political subjects or members of the national church, on the one hand, and as individuals with particular ethical, medical, or career goals, on the other. He also deploys the mean to differentiate between religious and scientific norms, as does Donne to contrast religious and political imperatives. To take another example, some erotic literature distinguishes between praiseworthy excess in love and moderation in other domains of life: lovers' norms diverge from those of political subjects or economic agents. Georgic poets sometimes use contrasting or even contradictory rhetorics concerning moderation and excess when representing domestic politics or foreign trade and when considering Englishmen as subjects or as economic consumers. In literary studies, scholars of eighteenth-century culture have emphasized the "discursive divide[s]" (to use Liz Bellamy's term) between, for example, ethical and economic discourse, as a defining characteristic of their period's modernity.[41] Yet such discursive divisions and tensions are increasingly in play, I contend, from the late sixteenth century through the late seventeenth century.

Much new historicist work has focused on what Louis Adrian Montrose has called "the synchronic text of a cultural system," that is, the relationship among contemporaneous literary and social "texts" conceived of as parts of a

unified, stable whole.[42] My work is, by contrast, doubly diachronic. I examine both changes in conceptions of means and extremes over the course of the early modern period and how those changes result from innovative appropriations of classical treatments of means and extremes. The very proliferation of ancient discourse about the mean upon which English authors drew—including many classical texts rediscovered during the period—not only provided extensive authority for the mean as norm but also increased its flexibility because of the numerous differences, large and small, within eclectic ancient texts about how the norm was to be understood, applied, and related to other philosophical tenets and values. Religious, political, and literary historians who have discussed the *via media* often treat the classical formulations as inert "background." This book, by contrast, examines how early modern authors articulated the distinctiveness of their period and their individual positions by the energizing appropriation and transformation of diverse classical texts. By focusing on what I take to be the central ancient ethical concept in early modern English culture, my work complements such recent explorations as Andrew Shifflett's and Reid Barbour's concerning how early modern English authors mediated their responses to their changing times by their particular engagements with ancient philosophic schools.[43]

Construing "literature" in its broad early modern sense of learned writing,[44] this study examines argumentative prose as well as verse, fiction, and drama. I focus particularly on works that reward close reading because of their complex allusive relationships to classical models, self-aware handling of language, and often rich sense of literary genre. Engaging with classical treatments of the mean encouraged aesthetic self-consciousness. Aristotle compared the ethical mean to a "perfect work of craftsmanship, that you could not take from . . . nor add to" (*NE* 2.6.9; trans. modified), an analogy that parallels his claim that everything beautiful lies between the too large and too small (*Poetics* 7.8–10). He also applied the mean to rhetoric in order to warn against opposite stylistic vices (*Rhetoric* 3.3.3, 3.8.1–3, 3.9.6, 3.12.6), a practice subsequently adopted by numerous ancient authors.[45] Such analogies and parallels between ethical and aesthetic norms encouraged early modern English authors to forge their own diverse connections between the means or extremes they advocated and the language they deployed. Some writers, for example, adopted "middle" style deemed suitable for celebrating the mean, while others used sublime images or hyperbolic figures to glorify extreme states.

The works I examine often deftly exploit generic conventions and expectations. Literary genres are themselves "fuzzy" concepts best approached in terms of Wittgensteinian "family resemblance" rather than essential defining features: members of a genre variously relate to one another due to the ever-changing generic developments produced by influence, imitation, and innovation.[46] Nevertheless, early modern authors who work in widely recognized, traditional genres or "historical kinds" (to use Alastair Fowler's term) self-

consciously evoke, by both similarities and differences, the longstanding generic traditions they engage. Such "historical kinds," with their distinctive subject matters and styles, are indeed a particularly "sedimented" form, rife with powerful literary and cultural memories. By embodying "values of very long standing," Fowler argues, genres may "partly resist period incorporation" and allow authors room to express visions beyond "immediate social contexts."[47] The appropriation of genres from other places and other times, even when the author deviates from or decisively rejects the values of his major generic models, afforded broad perspectives and imaginative freedoms that would have been unavailable if various widespread contemporaneous beliefs had simply been accepted as absolute constraints. With their recognized deviations from pure veridical assertion, fictions or verse in particular gave writers flexibility with respect to communal values. Early modern representations of the mean-extremes opposition engage in dialogue not only with the ancient philosophical tradition in which the concept received its most sustained elaboration but also with diverse generic traditions in which the concept was imaginatively applied to different features of individual and social life.

This study will examine in detail the diverse ways that authors working in—and against—various genres deploy the mean-extremes contrast. Donne's innovative early poems creatively appropriate Horatian satire and epistle. Early modern georgic poets diversely respond to their Virgilian model, which identified the mean with a farmer-soldier uneasily poised between rural idyll and imperial expansions. Authors of erotic literature imitate continental genres such as the Petrarchan sonnet, the chivalric romance, and Neoplatonizing pastoral romance that glorify passion in ways that challenge early modern English ethical discourse, with its calls for Aristotelian moderation in love. Symposiastic poets draw upon Anacreontic and Horatian depictions of both moderation and excess in drinking sharply at odds with much contemporaneous religious, medical, and economic discourse. Milton's *Paradise Lost*, a magnificent instance of the Renaissance conception of epic as a kind of "encyclopedia" of literary forms, engages with various genres whose representations of moderation and excess it diversely adapts and transforms.

## Rationale and Overview

Throughout this study I have sought to balance the intensive analysis of individual authors who are particularly original or influential (or both) with broader accounts of thematic and generic trends. While trying to convey the extensive ramifications of my topic, I have not tried to be exhaustive. For example, I say little about Shakespeare, whose treatments of means and extremes deserve a book unto themselves.[48] Though I have sought to chart diverse major literary and cultural mutations in the representation of means and

extremes, I proceed thematically and generically rather than chronologically in order to preclude any misleading notion of unilinear change. Particular discourses and genres develop in different ways as authors simultaneously respond to the specific literary and intellectual traditions in which they participate and refract contemporaneous events and conflicts. This study traces no neat progression or clear shift from the celebration of the mean to the embrace of excess. Instead I chart a series of uneven developments in early modern authors' ongoing struggle to define and represent their values by deploying means and extremes.

What follows is an overview of the book's contours. Part I, "Two Early Modern Revisions of the Mean," analyzes how Donne (chapter 1) and Bacon (chapter 2) very differently and innovatively deploy classical and Christian conceptions of the mean-extremes polarity as tools to be exploited rather than commonplaces to be invoked. While many contemporaries use the mean to justify prevailing social and religious formations, in his early poetry Donne adapts it to enlarge the sphere of individual freedom. Spurning the English church's self-description as the *via media*, however defined, Donne draws on ancient and Renaissance skepticism to propose a new mean of inquiry between rash acceptance and rejection of opposed Christian churches. Eschewing both the celebration of courtly splendor and the reaction which glorified a given position in the social hierarchy as the ideal mean estate, Donne invokes a fluid mean between conventional social identities that legitimizes a socially mobile self. Donne's compelling adaptations of the mean, while highly idiosyncratic, anticipate various early modern extensions of the concept to the needs of individuals seeking to define their proper relation to powerful sociopolitical forces.

Rejecting the Aristotelian tradition as moribund, Bacon claims various kinds of extremism as essential for human empowerment. He agrees with contemporaries that rulers and subjects must adhere to the mean for sociopolitical order. When considering persons as individuals capable of transcending ascribed sociopolitical roles, however, Bacon advocates their flexible use of means *or* extremes, depending on their particular situations and goals. In support of his anti-Aristotelian program for natural philosophy, the most influential aspect of his thought, Bacon also advocates both means and extremes in daring fashion. Influentially expanding upon the notion of an intellectual mean expounded by ancient and Scholastic predecessors, Bacon condemns the Aristotelian scientific method as proud and irresponsible extremism while promoting his own as a sober, reasonable *via media* of the mind. Yet in formulating the ambitious goals of natural philosophy, he extends his interest in empowerment to all mankind and argues that proper scientific practice, seeking to transform the human condition by conquering nature, is fueled by a charitable extremism far superior to Aristotelian moderation. Bacon's flexible

espousal of both means and extremes reverberates throughout and beyond the seventeenth century as diverse followers appropriate his contradictory legacy.

The next six chapters move from individual authors to genres and discourses that have been widely studied in scholarship but whose particular uses of the mean-extremes opposition to articulate conflicting cultural, sociopolitical, and religious visions have been largely neglected. Different sections examine texts centered on very different concerns: rural labor, war, commerce, and nationhood; love and sexuality; wine and drunkenness. Modifying or transforming the classical mean-extremes contrast, these works offer rival visions of the good or happy life with diverse implications for individual and nation.

Part II, "Means and Extremes in Early Modern Georgic," argues that both the Donnean struggle with regard to the nature of the true mean and the Baconian flexibility regarding means and extremes shape divergent georgic visions of early modern Britain's promise and perils as a nation. Inspired by the contradictory uses of the mean in Virgil's *Georgics* to articulate Rome's destiny, Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Joshuah Sylvester's *Divine Weeks and Works of . . . du Bartas*, Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion*, and Milton's *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* deploy competing cosmological, ethnographic, and sociopolitical visions of the golden mean to depict their visions of Britain as a modern rival to Virgil's Rome. All these works identify the farmer or a surrogate—including, most importantly, the georgic poet himself—with the golden mean and represent him as a national ideal. In so doing they challenge identifications of the nation with the monarchy and court. Georgic moderation is sometimes conceived of as harmonious cooperation with the "temperate" land and nation, but more often it is viewed as a laborious and even violent struggle against the excesses to which the land and nation are prone. While the first conception glorifies (albeit in patronizing fashion) a mean estate virtuously and happily rooted in a fixed place within the social hierarchy, moderation-as-struggle legitimizes the georgic poet, whose supposedly all-encompassing vision of social life defines him (like Donne in his early poetry) beyond existing social hierarchies.

After analyzing English georgic poems' celebrations of and exhortations to national temperance (chapter 3), I next examine the growing tensions in georgic poetry between the praise of moderation as the source of sociopolitical concord and celebrations of diverse sorts of extremism (chapter 4). By closely associating the temperate farmer with the imperial soldier as the foundations of Roman regeneration, Virgil's *Georgics* leaves a complex legacy promoting both national moderation and aggrandizement. Some English authors, including Spenser and Drayton, depict a composite ideal of the farmer-soldier who maintains some of the Virgilian emphasis upon moderation. Seventeenth-century English poets, however, more generally substitute members of the sociopolitical elite for humble farmer-soldiers as the source of national greatness and thus "co-opt" the antimonarchical and anticourtly implications of the

genre. Such English georgics as John Davies of Hereford's neglected *Micro-cosmos* (1603) and John Denham's vastly influential *Coopers Hill* (first published in 1642) exploit the tensions within the Virgilian genre. They suggest that the elite must not only embody and promote the mean for sociopolitical harmony but also indulge in or promote immoderate behavior for assuring national power and plenty—whether it be ruthless Machiavellian strategies, glorious imperial conquest, or "boundless" foreign trade and consumption of luxuries. In Restoration georgics partly inspired by Denham, Edmund Waller and Abraham Cowley treat virtuous moderation as an increasingly archaic norm while celebrating the growth of national wealth and might through trade and the Royal Navy's exploits. While the georgic traditionally employed a "middle" style appropriate for praising the temperate life, Denham and his heirs aspire to a sublimity worthy of English ambitions and achievements. By making the georgic a self-conscious expression of their nation's immoderate modernity—and its discontents—seventeenth-century poets ensure that the genre has a long poetic and cultural afterlife.

Part III, "Erotic Excess and Early Modern Social Conflicts," considers challenges to traditional notions of moderation in the literature of love that parallel and, in places, oppose concurrent developments in georgic by pitting erotic passion against national loyalties. Though early modern English Protestant ministers emphasized the importance of Aristotelian moderation in conjugal relations, imaginative writers from the Elizabethan period to the Restoration increasingly exalted "extreme" passion. In so doing they undermined a key premise of the early modern gender hierarchy—the superiority of rational, self-controlled males to passionate, prone-to-excess females—and contested the traditional identification of men's intense passion for women with shameful effeminization. The ideal, moderate marriage was often associated with the "mean" estate, neither too high nor too low, or with the social order as a whole, based on the replication of ascribed status through marriage to spouses who were neither too much higher nor too much lower in rank. As I show in chapter 5, writers from the Elizabethan through the Caroline period challenged such assumptions in two distinct ways. Samuel Daniel and Thomas Lodge identified erotic extremism with the "true nobility" of the virtuous, whose passion for a socially superior beloved justified upward mobility. Philip Sidney's influential *Arcadia* and the Caroline court writings of William Davenant and Thomas Carew treated extreme passion in distinctively aristocratic fashion. In these texts all-consuming erotic obsession, represented either as devotion to one exalted beloved or as unrestrained indulgence in sensual appetite, served to distinguish the highborn lover from social inferiors, whose concern for "mediocrity" reflected a paltry investment in a "mean"—contemptible as well as middle—estate.

Focusing on Davenant's *Gondibert* (1651) and works of John Dryden and Aphra Behn, chapter 6 examines how the aristocratic cult of extreme passion

gained momentum during the mid- and late seventeenth century in dialectical interaction with the political and economic discourse concerning "interest." Interregnum and Restoration writers of diverse political and religious positions claimed to be promoting the "public interest," conceived of as including and balancing the legitimate interests of various political, socioeconomic, and religious groups. Interest discourse, even when deployed (as it often was) by defenders of the monarchy and the social hierarchy, opposed rational calculation to aristocratic excess. In response, Davenant, Dryden, and Behn contrasted interest—depicted as ignoble, mercenary deficiency and as the sordid reality behind claims to moderation—with the noble excess of overpowering erotic passion. Disputing traditional notions of effeminacy, Dryden celebrated self-sacrificing love on the part of both males and females that was all the more heroic—and "masculine" in its Stoic strength—because it struggled with intense desire. Behn, by contrast, transvalued conventional norms by depicting passion as rendering both genders passively—but gloriously—"feminine."

In contrast to his Caroline dramas, which located ideal love at court, Davenant's Interregnum epic romance placed erotic extremes within a pastoral world of retirement removed from public corruption even as the poem strove to reconnect the erotic and political realms. In his political and religious verse Dryden responded to successive crises by espousing a pro-court version of moderation. Yet in his dramas Dryden, like Behn in various genres, celebrated with lofty rhetoric and sublime images a private sphere of extreme passion pitted against a degraded public realm where base interest reigned. While contemporaneous georgic reevaluated luxurious consumption in "interest" terms as a contributor to the national wealth, Behn associated erotic passion with a luxurious prodigality nobly indifferent to public concerns. Though defending a residual aristocratic ethos against the norms of a commercial society, both Dryden and Behn influenced emergent middle-class representations of companionate marriage, which was increasingly celebrated as a haven of passion apart from the public world of economic and political interest.

Turning from erotic passion to what was at times its great rival and at other moments its accompaniment—love of the bottle—Part IV, "Moderation and Excess in the Seventeenth-Century Symposiastic Lyric," explores lyrics in the Anacreontic and Horatian symposiastic tradition, in which the poet calls for or enacts a symposium or drinking party. Anacreontics and Horace called sometimes for moderate drinking with warnings against drunken violence, sometimes for a harmless drunkenness as a way of attaining poetic rapture or escape from mortal cares. English poets who adapt and transform ancient symposiastic poetry participate in major cultural conflicts of the period: between tavern norms of sociable pleasure and religious, Galenic, and mercantilist exhortations to observe the mean in wine drinking; between elite and popular modes of indulgence; and between diverse religious positions both within and outside the English church.

As chapter 7 details, English poets often distinguish refined drinkers of wine, a classically sanctioned as well as expensive beverage, from the crude and supposedly more disorderly imbibers of the notably nonclassical ale and beer. In generically and tonally complex poems that combine symposiastic topoi with antisymposiastic motifs, hyperbolic enthusiasm with sober moralizing, Ben Jonson reveals his ambivalence concerning wine drinking as a source of cultured pleasure and poetic inspiration that is also potentially excessive. His Caroline disciples simplify his legacy in one respect by defiantly celebrating drunkenness as a noble excess. They identify themselves with a classically sanctioned sociability, a court culture, and/or an anti-Puritan Catholicism or Arminianism superior to the hypocritical and antisocial morality of their religious critics. Yet the Sons of Ben also revive an ancient symposiastic motif ignored by Jonson: the anti-Aristotelian identification of heavy drinking itself with moderation insofar as it curtails unruly desires for what one does not have and fosters contentment with one's circumstances. In some of the most complex and varied drinking poems of the mid-seventeenth century, Robert Herrick simultaneously continues the Jonsonian celebration of the poet as an elite, inspired wine drinker and adapts the contentment topos to praise both himself and the lower orders in defiance of Puritan killjoys. Acknowledging but seeking to minimize the negative implications of social fragmentation, he portrays alehouse revels and neoclassical symposia as distinctive but parallel expressions of the need to escape from cares, each with its own dangers of excess.

Chapter 8 focuses on polarizations within symposiastic poetry during and after the civil war that ultimately brought the Anacreontic-Horatian tradition into disrepute. In the 1640s Richard Lovelace constructs a Royalist response to defeat that legitimizes intoxication as an appropriate response to hard times. Pitting Horatian decorum against Anacreontic recklessness and tempering drunken revelry with Stoic contentment, Lovelace's greatest poem, "The Grasse-hopper," suggests that symposiastic tradition has internal answers to its own excesses. Yet with mounting despair among Cavalier poets that they could do no more than ignobly survive, a nonclassical vulgarity also infects the drinking poetry of Lovelace and his contemporaries. His younger contemporaries Charles Cotton and Alexander Brome travesty classical motifs by celebrating mindless drunken and erotic excess as survival mechanisms for defeated Royalists. In two sonnets of the 1650s Milton disputes the identification of party poetry with the Cavaliers: he celebrates a temperate pleasure appropriate for supporters rather than opponents of the Parliamentary-Puritan revolution. In so doing Milton distances himself from the excesses not only of Cavalier symposiastic poetry but also of the Horatian verse that he emulates. Yet Milton's godly sonnets were not influential. During the Restoration Tories adapt Brome's drunken contempt for thinking to declare loyalty to the monarchy, which the happy tippler will not trouble, while libertines like John Wilmot, earl of Rochester, glory in the feverish pursuit of transgressive sympo-

siastic and erotic pleasure that diverge from Anacreontic-Horatian models of pleasurable contentment and testify, like erotic excess, to the aristocrat's superiority over déclassé self-control. Concurrently one finds a growing disdain for the symposiastic tradition on the part of an increasingly "polite" literary and social elite that pursued moderate convivial pleasures associated with rational discourse.

Milton, whose ventures in georgic and symposiastic poetry figure prominently in earlier chapters, takes center stage in the book's final section, part V, "Reimagining Moderation: The Miltonic Example." Forcefully responding to the valorization of extremes in English georgic, erotic, and symposiastic writings, Milton's *Paradise Lost* provides a simultaneously innovative and immensely influential representation of moderation. Despite his titular theme of loss, Milton presents unfallen Adam and Eve as models of a partially recoverable ideal. Wresting from Cavaliers and Royalists a hedonist ethics first espoused by Xenophon, Milton has his Edenic couple discover in temperate self-restraint both a moral discipline and the source of truest pleasure. Adam and Eve's pleasurable restraint is grounded in their virtuous self-respect, represented as an Aristotelian mean and applicable in distinctive ways to husband and wife. Milton derives this conception of self-respect from a highly original synthesis of the Protestant glorification of conjugal relations and classical and classically inflected patristic views concerning human dignity. Against the Restoration he detested, Milton portrays pre-fallen Adam and Eve as evidence that self-governance depends upon norms of pleasurable moderation and of self-respect that his nation has ignored.

Despite the epic's politically contestatory stance, the focus on the married couple in Milton's quickly canonized poem vitally contributed to the general trend in early modern literature toward celebrating a private sphere of love. Milton's emphasis upon the first human couple allowed readers to imagine diverse relations between the values that ideally structured the self and existing social and political institutions. His depiction of Edenic conjugal love, both passionate and restrained, appealed to late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century readers and writers of different religious and political persuasions for whom the domestic sphere had become the locus of affect and ethical reflection and who sought to reconcile traditional norms of conjugal moderation with opposed claims for intense passion. Furthermore, Milton's focus on a mean of self-respect as the foundation of self-restraint was profoundly in tune with the growing anti-Calvinist, Arminian strands within late-seventeenth- and eighteenth-century theology as well as more secular contemporary ethics. Miltonic self-respect, I argue, remains a recognizable ideal in liberal tradition down to our own time.

This study tries to recover, with both sympathy and rigor, the often strange modes of thought and imagination of a distinctive cultural period. Yet I take seriously the claim for modernity in the term "early modern" and see this

book as a partial genealogy of tensions and ambivalences within contemporary culture—necessarily partial, because so much has intervened between then and now. While early modern debates about the national church and constitution are of largely historical interest, the mean-extremes distinction continues to resonate in cultural debates in ways similar, sometimes strikingly so, to those I describe. At various points I suggest how recent viewpoints resemble and ultimately derive from positions that first came to prominence during the early modern period concerning individual and collective norms of reasonableness, pleasure, and passion. I have thus tried to maintain a *via media* of my own between identification and estrangement, which seems to me the appropriate response to an early modern past to which my readers and I are in diverse ways indebted.[49] Yet since one person's reasonable middle ground is another's excess or deficiency, I recognize that some will wish for either more or less "presentist" material. So let me close by reminding such readers that their dissatisfactions instantiate my theme.