In the introductory epistle to his 1580 translation and Protestantization of Thomas à Kempis’s devotional treatise *Imitatio Christi*, Thomas Rogers makes a case for the continued relevance of this Continental, late-medieval text to his English Protestant audience: “A shame were it therefore for us to imitate so painfule as manie do in eloquence Cicero; in philosophie Aristotle; in law Justinian; in Physick Galen for worldlie wisdome; yet to imitate, as most do, the French in vanitie, the Dutch in luxerie, in braverie the Spanish, the Papists in idolatrie, in impietie and al impuritie of life the Atheists, and not to folowe our Savior Christ in heavenlie wisdome and in al Godlines of manners.” Rogers could have saved himself the trouble. As it turned out, Elizabethan readers needed little persuading to appreciate the enduring appeal of Thomas à Kempis. Rogers’s translation of the *Imitation of Christ*—just one of thirteen English translations and three paraphrases of the text undertaken between 1500 and 1700—was one of the steadiest devotional sellers of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. It was printed seventeen times between 1580 and 1640 and nearly every other year between 1580 and 1609. The popularity of the *Imitation of Christ*, not to mention the wide popularity of other religious how-to manuals like Arthur Dent’s *Plaine

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Man’s Path—way to Heaven (printed at least twenty-seven times between 1601 and 1682) and Edmund Bunny’s Protestantization of the first part of Robert Persons’s First booke of the Christian exercise (which sold at least thirty editions between 1582 and 1640), is a powerful testament to the religious significance attached to the imitation of models in the period. However, while the imitative mode has long been recognized as a “central and pervasive” feature of early modern English literary and intellectual culture, imitatio Christi, the traditional devotional practice of imitating Christ in his person and Passion, has received comparatively little attention in scholarly accounts of post-Reformation English devotional culture. This disjunction in the critical histories of literary imitatio and imitatio Christi is at least partly attributable to a tendency among an earlier generation of scholars to organize treatments of early modern English piety along rigidly drawn confessional lines, privileging Protestant over Catholic, and “Puritan” over “Anglican,” as representative of what is most distinctive about the period and therefore most worthy of close critical attention. In more recent years, revisionist and postrevisionist historical approaches have yielded a more nuanced picture of English lay religiosity that—among other things—invites fresh attention to traditional devotional practices like the imitation of Christ.

Even the most cursory examination of the period’s devotional print culture affirms the cross-confessional appeal of Christian imitatio. Ian Green’s critical survey of the period’s best and steadiest devotional sellers includes a significant number of sermons and devotional works that emphasize meditating on or modeling oneself after the person of Christ, among them works by “godly” authors like William Perkins (A Declaration of the True Manner of Knowing Christ Crucified, 1596), John Preston (The Breast-Plate of Faith and Love, 1630), Daniel Dyke (the second of his Two Treatises, 1616), Edward Reynolds (the third of his Three Treatises, 1631), James Ussher (Immanuel, 1638), and Richard Sibbes (The Bruised Reede, and Smoaking Flax, 1630). The very existence of these works should put to rest the old Anglican/Puritan binary, suggesting that any “dichotomy between a puritan focus on Christ’s atoning work and an Anglican one on his moral example is far from clear cut.” Their circulation alongside “Anglican” and Catholic steady sellers that focused on...
Christ’s life and passion—such as Lancelot Andrewes’s Passion and Nativity sermons, Luis de Granada’s Of Prayer and Meditation (first printed legally in England in 1592), and Robert Southwell’s Marie Magdalen’s Funeral Teares (1591)—suggests something of the scope of recovery remaining to be done on the meaning or range of meanings attached to the imitation of Christ in post-Reformation England.

Rogers’s decision, in the passage quoted above, to contextualize Protestant anxieties about the propriety of patterning oneself after Christ within humanist debates about the positive and negative potential of imitation suggests why and how scholars of English literature should participate in this project of recovery. The ease with which Rogers moves here between categories of imitation we would tend to separate out as “sacred” and “secular” is a reminder that the literary imitations of authors like Sidney and Milton, whose careers mark the literary poles of this study, spoke from and to a culture that—insofar as it recognized a sacred/secular binary at all—tended to identify it as an unfortunate and at least partially reparable consequence of Original Sin. The “turn to religion” so remarked upon in surveys of recent scholarship on early modern English literature reflects a growing consensus within the discipline that the literary innovations and anxieties of the period cannot be understood properly apart from the theological innovations and anxieties that preceded, accompanied, and sometimes grew out of them.9 As Brian Cummings puts it in his important treatment of this subject, Grammar and Grace, the Reformation was a “reformation in and of words, a linguistic, literary, and textual revolution.”10 Its literature is thus inseparable from the literary program of humanism that produced the early modern canon and that, as Cummings points out, “itself developed in response to the need to solve certain kinds of theological problem [sic].”11 Pursuing the converse of Cummings’s argument that the Reformation is ultimately a linguistic revolution, this book takes as its point of departure the thesis that early modern imitatio is always, even if at some remove, a religious project, a tribute to and (partial) rehabilitation of humanity’s original creation in the image and likeness of God. Accordingly, it reads the debates surrounding literary imitatio as corollaries of broader theological questions about the role of natural human signs in the supernatural processes of salvation and sanctification. These
questions, I will argue, constitute the deep structure of Philip Sidney's poetics and that of the many writers who inherited his literary legacy—John Milton chief among them. A brief overview of the critical history of the debates surrounding literary *imitatio*, particularly as they played out in early modern England, will help to clarify the complementary relationship between literary and theological categories of analysis in this study.

Modern critics emphasize the important role literary *imitatio* plays in Renaissance critical discourse as a strategy for addressing a crisis of meaning precipitated by humanist innovations in literary and biblical scholarship. In contrast to the medieval model of interpretation, which necessitated reading even pagan texts *in Christo*, humanist textual practices took a more characteristically "modern" approach to culturally remote texts, privileging historical and philological sensitivity over typological and allegorical sophistication. The epistemological anxieties precipitated by this shift (while not always explicitly stated) are readily observable in the critical discourse of the period, which is preoccupied with the notion that the correct interpretation of texts, including sacred ones, is a devilishly tricky business, contingent upon the always more or less incomplete recovery of a remote context, language, and history. Early modern poetic theory and practice thematize the complexity of reading, writing, translating, and commenting in a world of linguistic mutability where, as Montaigne puts it, "language flows every day out of our hands." As scholars like Brian Cummings, Richard Lanham, and Richard Waswo have pointed out, these new interpretative techniques effectively transferred long-standing questions about the reliability of language from their traditional home in the complex computations of scholastic logic to the pragmatic art of rhetoric, thereby extending their reach while simultaneously heightening the disturbing impression that what is perceived as "reality" might in fact be the effect of words.

In this context, literary *imitatio* emerges as an important strategy for mediating the tensions between what Waswo calls "the cosmetic and [the] constitutive views of the language/meaning relation." Bridging the gap between total linguistic and historical contingency and a closed system of Christian signification, *imitatio* allows early modern authors a large measure of creativity within an at least provisionally stable field of signification. Thomas M. Greene clarifies this idea in his classic work on literary *imitatio*...
imitatio in the Renaissance: “Imitation acts out a passage of history that is a retrospective version or construct, with all the vulnerability of a construct. It has no ground other than the ‘modern’ universe of meanings it is helping to actualize and the past universe it points to allusively and simplifies. It seeks no suprahistorical order; it accepts the temporal, the contingent, and the specific as a given. But it makes possible an emergent sense of identity, personal and cultural.” Practiced skillfully, then, early modern imitatio is a technique for constructing original, but broadly meaningful, systems of signification from the remnants of an authoritative, but irrecoverable, past. It is a delicate art, balanced perilously between the extremes of slavish traditionalism and radically destabilizing innovation.

Perhaps not surprisingly, it is also a site of intense cultural conflict. Throughout the early modern period, literary critics on the Continent and in England debated the ends and means of right imitatio. What criteria legitimate a given author as exemplary? Is style or substance the proper object of imitation? How closely or freely should one follow one's model? What (if any) are the provisions for accommodating a culturally or linguistically remote original to the particularities of one's own time, place, or dialect? And perhaps most importantly, what distinguishes true imitation or emulation—which is understood to participate in and in some cases exceed the essential excellence of its object—from mimicry, which strikes a purely superficial resemblance?

In the context established above, such questions are not merely technical, nor are they exclusively literary. They speak to deeply felt and widely held anxieties about the relationship of linguistic “surfaces” to the poetic, philosophical, and theological “essences” they were long believed to contain and convey. The life-and-death confessional contests of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries imbued these already metaphysical questions with an emphatically “religious” urgency. Can human signs point humans to God or merely to fictions of their own making? Do they enable people to follow and become like Christ or entangle them in the labyrinth of their own selfish desires? If, as Richard Waswo’s formulation of the cosmetic-constitutive continuum implies, the Renaissance is marked by the hope of the former and the fear of the latter, then imitatio can be seen as a dangerous but necessary strategy for improving the odds in God’s favor. By grounding language in authorized and authorizing sources, it reduces (to
borrow a phrase from Waswo) the “intoxicating and terrifying possibility of making meaning,” the possibility, in other, less anachronistic words, of sin.

The implications of early modern debates surrounding literary imitatio for the traditional devotional model of the imitatio Christi are perhaps clearest in the writings of Erasmus, whose vision of a uniquely Christian eloquence (itself deeply influenced by the piety of the devotio moderna) was widely disseminated in England by the humanist pedagogy of his friend and admirer John Colet. Brian Cummings considers the publication of Erasmus’s Latin translation of the Greek New Testament in 1516 to mark the advent of a “new mode of Christian reading,” centered on the text of scripture (rather than the body of Christ or the sacrament) as the primary site of human encounter with the divine. In this new hermeneutic, the Bible (at least in its original languages) manifests the presence of Christ, celebrated in the Paraclesis as both the author and the substance of “the truth itself,” ipsa veritas. However, the problems accompanying this promise of a literal, “literary” presence emerge the moment one moves from Erasmus’s newly edited Greek to his parallel Latin translation, where, as Erasmus himself acknowledges, Christ is not literally present but symbolically represented. As Cummings points out, this new, emphatically “literary” Christology raises the stakes for literary study, while simultaneously necessitating the much wider dissemination of its methods and habits of mind—far beyond the narrow compass of scholars able and willing to learn Greek. In such a scenario, imitatio Christi can be construed as virtually synonymous with literary imitatio. The central pursuit of the Christian life is not to assimilate to Christ’s literal body, whether imagined individually or corporately, but to artfully (if imperfectly) bridge the gap between sermo’s “fallen,” historically contingent surface and its liberating, “literary” essence.

This is certainly the position of Erasmus, who reads the preoccupations of humanist literary culture as of a piece with the pursuit of Christian piety. In his Ciceronianus, for example, he associates the linguistic and historical anachronism of the Ciceronians (scholars who advocated the strict imitation of Cicero as the sole criterion of eloquence) with sin, particularly with the “fallenness” of all good models from their original purity and with our consequent tendency to conflate the appearance of a thing with its essential reality (a tendency Erasmus identifies as idolatry):
Just as men dishonor St. Benedict by boasting themselves Benedictines when in dress, in title, and in life they approach nearer Sardanapalus than St. Benedict; and St. Francis—that man incapable of ill-will—when they boast of his name though they represent in their characters more nearly the Pharisees—and St. Augustine when they say that they are Augustinians though they are far removed from the doctrine as well as the piety of so great a man; and possibly the Christ when they have nothing of him except the title: so men cast a blot on the fame of Cicero who have nothing on their tongues except Cicero and Ciceronians, when none are farther from the eloquence of Cicero than they.24

According to Erasmus, a true Ciceronian would privilege essence over appearance, adapting the Ciceronian ideal of eloquence to the demands of his particular time and place: “Thus it can happen,” he asserts, “that he is most a Ciceronian who is most unlike Cicero, that is, who speaks best and most pointedly, though in a different way; and this is not surprising for the environment now is entirely different” (78).

For Erasmus, of course, the chief difference between the environment of Cicero and that of his early modern admirers is Christianity. He accuses the Ciceronians of impiety, insisting that while there is certainly nothing wrong with imitating Cicero, true eloquence is rooted in the imitation of Christ, the incarnate Word, whose revelation in the scriptures imbues historically contingent signifiers with transcendent significance. According to Erasmus, right belief is a precondition of eloquence. He asserts that “when this [belief] is accomplished, nothing will seem more ornamental than the Christian religion, nothing more persuasive than the name of Jesus Christ, nothing more charming than the words by means of which the great men of the Church show forth her mysteries” (129). Disciplined by the church and steeped in the sacred language of the scriptures, the eloquence of the Christian orator is portrayed by Erasmus not as “a patchwork” of classical sources but rather as the original and natural expression of a uniquely created soul in communion with its source, “a river flowing from the fount” of the heart (123). For Erasmus, then, imitatio and imitatio Christi are one and the same, a sacred exercise in improvisation, a variation on a theme with any number of potential orientations toward the
divine original, but with only one ultimate aim: Christian virtue. As he puts it in the closing lines of *Ciceronianus*, “The liberal arts, philosophy, and oratory are learned to the end that we may know Christ, that we may celebrate the glory of Christ” (129).

This intersection between literary theory and theology is a double-edged sword. If Erasmus’s epistemic optimism links more explicitly literary instances of *imitatio* to the imitation of Christ, so does what Waswo has called the “intoxicating and terrifying possibility” of making meaning. Indeed, in early modern England, the association between Erasmus’s moderate, moralizing vision of good *imitatio* and Protestant orthodoxy is both explicit and widespread. Slavish *imitatio* is most frequently linked to papist superstition, while unrestrained creativity is typically equated with Protestant sectarianism. Both extremes are idolatrous. In a letter to Philip Sidney, Hubert Languet warns his protégé to “beware of falling into the heresy of those who think that the height of excellence consists in the imitation of Cicero.” William Webbe seconds this advice in *A Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586): “An imitation should not be too servile or superstitious, as though one durst not varry one jotte from the example.”

The association of immoderate creativity with irreverence, on the other hand, goes all the way back to Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly* and continues throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In his preface to *Gondibert*, for example, William Davenant links the unrestrained pursuit of originality with Puritan enthusiasm, while Milton’s *Paradise Lost* attributes this same quality to Satan.

The specter of sin notwithstanding, the general hopefulness of English literary culture (particularly sixteenth-century literary culture) about the prospects of promoting good (i.e., Protestant) *imitatio* offers an important context for English devotional culture, which, as the work of Ian Green has amply demonstrated, is far more invested in the project of artful “self-fashioning” than the old critical consensus of its “Calvinist” character can account for. No doubt, and as Green points out, this “humanist” slant is at least partly attributable to market forces, the mysterious workings of divine providence not being particularly amenable to the steady sale of how-to manuals. That said, the surprising enthusiasm of English Protestants for devotional models is intriguingly of a piece with the faith of “forward” Protestant poets like Philip Sidney in the power of literary
exempla to effect meaningful individual and social reformation, even transformation.

Indeed, in light of recent reevaluations of both English popular devotional culture and the eclectic engagement of its “elite” counterparts with the intellectual and theological resources of pre- and Counter-Reformation Christianity (not to mention international Protestantism), what used to look like a painful contradiction between poetry and piety reads more like symbiosis. Sidney provides perhaps the most striking case in point. In recent years, his poetics—long presumed to be in productive tension with his Calvinism—has been decisively (if indirectly) linked to the rhetorical theology of Philip Melanchthon, whose conviction of the power of the Word to manifest divine presence was, if anything, even more firm and fully worked out than that of his acknowledged intellectual forbear, Erasmus. On this score, Robert Stillman has offered the fullest account of the relationship of Sidney’s vision of poetic imitatio to Melanchthon’s enthusiasm for bonae litterae as the incarnation of the notitiae, or innate ideas of the divine image and created order naturally implanted in the human mind as a complement to (and imitation of) the divine oration that is sermo. In this rereading of Sidney, whose career inspired a new generation of self-consciously religious and political imaginative literature, English Protestant poetics emerges out of (rather than in tension with) Protestant piety, both of which are rooted in a logocentric conceptualization of the imitatio Christi.

If this optimistic vision of imitatio (literary and Christi) was always portrayed as compromised, its vulnerability to the pervasiveness and intractability of human sinfulness became more pronounced in the writings of Sidney’s and Rogers’s literary and devotional heirs, including Elizabeth Cary, a Catholic convert and the first female playwright to be published in England, and John Milton, whose iconoclastic revisioning of good imitatio is the endpoint of this study. As we will see, seventeenth-century literary and devotional cultures are intensely preoccupied with questions about the reliability of language, both as a vehicle of divine presence and revelation and as an instrument of human knowledge and power. To a certain extent, this emphasis on the radical interpretability of language (and indeed all signs) is the terminus of a pan-European humanist pedagogy, with equally palpable effects on Continental literary and devotional
culture, Catholic and Protestant alike. However, I will argue that the doctrinal emphasis of Protestantism on the centrality of the Word, combined with the uniquely “literary” character of the not-so-settled Protestant settlement, foregrounds the theological implications of *imitatio* for seventeenth-century English authors with particular clarity.

One of the most important issues at stake for these authors is the problem of idolatry. Both species of *imitatio* are associated by their critics with a sinful superficiality that seeks to redirect human signifying away from dialogue with the living Word and toward the “flesh” (by which I mean both the body and the material world) as the source and site of human knowledge, power, and pleasure. In the case of literary *imitatio*, this anxiety is most often focused on the seductive sights, sounds, and subject matter of poetry and playacting. In devotional culture, it clusters around the person of the monarch and the corporate worship of the church visible. Is the monarch a divinely authorized image of the divine order (and therefore to be followed without question), a fallible human imitation of said order (and therefore eligible for reformation), or a downright diabolical simulacrum (idol) in utter opposition to the Word? Are the set prayers and ceremonial worship mandated by the prayer book useful external helps for demonstrating and cultivating authentic (i.e., internalized) piety, or false, “fleshly” impediments to a genuine personal encounter with the living Word? Treating such questions as of a piece with their “literary” counterparts both allows a more accurate tracing of the continuities and discontinuities between late medieval Christocentric piety and its post-Reformation logocentric analogues and suggests how the literary movements of humanism, Protestantism, and Counter-Reformation Catholicism repurposed the remnants of late medieval popular piety as metaphors for their own hermeneutic anxieties.

The book is divided into four chapters, each treating a different element of the complex relationship between religious and literary practices of imitation. That topical continuity is made more concrete by each section’s return to some aspect of the career, reputation, or intellectual influence of Sir Philip Sidney, Elizabethan England’s premier defender of poetry and internationally recognized paragon of Christian knighthood. The figure of Sidney functions as a nexus for my treatment of a wide variety of contemporary literary and religious genres, all of them concerned