Testament, together with a translation by Brantôme; André Thévet’s encomiastic commentary on the Testament; and Turnebus’s dedication of his Adversaria to Hospital. This second volume in Loris Petris’s highly careful and rich treatment of Hospital’s works is a much needed instrument that promotes a more complete understanding of personages and their behavior during the Wars of Religion.

The Lying Mirror: The First-Person Stance and Sixteenth-Century Writing.
James Helgeson.

Reviewed by: Jeff Kendrick
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In The Lying Mirror, James Helgeson continues to probe questions of textual agency that he considered in 2001 with his Harmonie divine et subjectivité poétique (Geneva: Droz) and took up again in the 2005 article “Harmony, Anamorphosis and the Conceptual Scheme” (Romantic Review). In this latest case, Helgeson examines the effect of the first-person stance on the interpretation of sixteenth-century literature by exploring the ethical construction of the “I.” While maintaining a safe distance from the thorny questions regarding the “self” in the sixteenth century, Helgeson outlines a theory of socially based interaction between writer and a community of readers and applies it to a wide variety of first-person texts in order to look at issues of truthfulness and agency and to nuance accepted readings of familiar passages.

The book’s introduction provides a helpful summary of work done on identity construction in the Renaissance while defining key terms such as “intentionality” that recur throughout the work. A discussion on the difference between “self” (that inner “us-ness”) and “ethos” (that which we project to the outside world) and the author’s preference for the latter conclude the prefatory remarks.

The first of the two principal parts of the book lays the theoretical framework upon which the analysis of the second part rests. The former section is divided into three chapters. Helgeson begins by pointing out problems that arise from connecting the first-person stance to the idea of “selfhood” and successively examines texts dealing with perspective. Works by Leon Battista Alberti, Descartes, Pascal, Wittgenstein, and Montaigne suggest that a more cognitive model focusing more on the directedness of the author, or his intention, and alterations between the first and third person might clarify our understanding of what sixteenth-century people understood or believed about the entity later thinkers would term the “self.”

In the next two chapters, the author goes on to challenge the notion of reading the “self” in the “other.” Although Helgeson’s use of Erasmus’s Adages, Montaigne’s musings on friendship and cannibalism, and the case of Arnauld du Till’s impersonation of Martin Guerre highlights the strengths of metaphors such as mirrors when talking about the fusion of souls, these instances also question accepted convention about seeing oneself in the other. Lying and its relationship to meaning take center stage in the third chapter of this section. Augustine’s criteria for truthfulness in De mendacio serve as the foundation for the discussion of dishonest speech acts that extends to twentieth- and twenty-first-century thinkers. The reader is guided through detailed definitions of early modern concepts surrounding sincerity such as voluntas, sentential, mens, intellectus, and sensus as Helgeson methodically argues for applying an “internalist, representationalist and mentalist theory
of meaning" to sixteenth-century texts in order to read them correctly. The author reminds readers that though this difference exists, it is through the lens of ethos that the reader (the "thee") perceives the "I" in the first-person texts that are under scrutiny; therefore, it is possible to discuss such texts without recourse to the "self" as such. Instead of focusing on "selfhood," the critic would be better served considering the notion of vectors linking the individual to society and vice versa in sixteenth-century texts.

The second half of the book applies this conceptual framework in turn to polemical and public letters from Erasmus, passages concerning meaning in Rabelais's chronicles, and a sampling of early modern poetry. Building on the ideas of truthfulness and ethos, an analysis of the polemical exchange between Erasmus and Edward Lee shows that what should concern critics is the way in which the authors create their and the contemporary reader's reaction to the authorial creation. Instead of creating a "self" through writing, Helgeson convincingly demonstrates that authors establish "charity" in a vectored space between a given community and themselves in order to ensure a text's ability to evoke a response in the reader. As the next chapter points out, whether this response is present in the author's mind or purely the result of the reader's reaction to the text is a complex question. This section concludes that the answer is both yes and no.

Analyzing the idea of signs in Pantagruel and the Tiers Livre and referring to Hans Holbein's "The Ambassadors," Helgeson leads the reader through critical responses to select passages (and in turn to the question of meaning in Rabelais's chronicles as a whole). Helgeson finds that Rabelais vacillates on the question of the source of meaning, suggesting that sixteenth-century writers obfuscate intentionality in order to make it difficult for readers to pinpoint the source of what a text actually says. By so doing, writing can continue its (often subversive) work without crossing a line that would send a book (and its author) into the fires of persecution.

The blurring of the relationship between the "I" of a text and the author of such a text serves as the introduction to the final chapter. Here, Helgeson uses early modern poetry to highlight different techniques for connecting, and obscuring the connection between, the first-person pronoun and its antecedent. He contends that insisting on severing the "I" from the author is anachronistic imposition on texts given the sixteenth-century penchant for embracing many variations on the relationship between the first-person pronoun and the text's author even within the same work. Similarly, today's critics should look at the purposes surrounding the use of "I" in a given poem and accept a wide range of possible links between poetic personae and their authors. This emphasis on poems as instantiating poetic action must also take into account what the poem in its particular context is doing.

The Lying Mirror offers a masterful analysis of the first-person stance in sixteenth-century literature and provides a plausible alternative to "self-" based theoretical conceptions of the "I." Accordingly, this volume is an invaluable aid to anyone investigating the history of the individual and its representation in literature.