



## Language and Subjectivity in the *Book of Margery Kempe*

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In this paper I extend the argument I made in my 2021 essay on the *Book of Margery Kempe* in which I drew on Philippe Lejeune's analysis of third-person narration in modern autobiographies to argue that Kempe's famous, habitual use of the third person is a mode of figuration that both inscribes her divided identity and precludes the reader's encounter with a knowable life. The narratological distinction between the statement [*énoncé*] and the enunciation [*énonciation*] not only brings into focus a range of textual effects in the *Book* such as distancing and irony but also points to the impossibility of reading the *Book* as either autobiography or as writing, as a linguistic event. Its status is not either/or but rather neither/both (Ovid's *nec utrumque et utrumque videntur*, which of course refers to a different ontology: that of Hermaphroditus's body, which is not male or female but rather appears to be neither and both). The *Book's* figures, which draw attention to the play of signification within the text, do not give us access to its author's internal reality, let alone her unconscious, and yet a combination of intra- and extra-textual features have taught us to read the *Book* as if the life preceded the writing, and continue to exert a powerful force. I will consider in more depth the *Book's* use of personal pronouns, in particular the switch between third and first person and the polarity of I and you, by putting Lejeune, Emile Benveniste, and the *Book* in conversation. Lejeune notes that the switch between persons in some modern autobiographies bears witness to the fact that "It is as if, in autobiography, no combination of the personal pronouns could 'fully express' the person in a satisfactory manner." But is expressivity – the expression in writing of a prior life – at stake in Kempe's *Book*? Benveniste draws attention to the highly unusual nature of the class of words we call the 'personal pronouns,' a class that "escapes the status of all the other signs of language" in that "*they do not refer to a concept or to an individual*. There is no concept 'I' that incorporates all the *I's* that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers." I am not the first to consider the *Book* in the light of Benveniste's linguistic insights but I want to press more closely on how Kempe's subjectivity is constituted through her exercise of pronouns in the *Book*, and how that contributes to the text's neither/both, life/writing status.