This English translation of Maurizio Bettini’s *Le orecchie di Hermes* follows the publication of the original Italian edition by ten years and the appearance of *Anthropology and Roman Culture* by twenty. Yet even a decade after *Le orecchie*’s initial publication, it is difficult to overstate the significance of this work for Anglophone classicists. Conceived as a companion volume to *Anthropology and Roman Culture*, this collection of essays presents a new phase of Bettini’s scholarship that both broadens and sharpens the focus of the approach he articulated there. In *Anthropology and Roman Culture*, Bettini introduced several specific lines of inquiry and theoretical perspectives that have characterized his unique brand of Roman anthropology. The essays in this volume reflect Bettini’s ongoing commitment to an unambiguously “emic” level of cultural analysis, and here readers will find further evidence of how successfully Bettini continues to integrate traditional techniques of classical studies with modern anthropological theories and methods. In particular, this book demonstrates the potential of bringing aspects of Clifford Geertz’s symbolic anthropology and Yuri Lotman’s cultural semiotics to bear on an understanding of Roman cultural forms. The two chapters that frame the work exemplify this approach. In “Hermes’ Ears” Bettini analyzes a series of myths and beliefs associated with that god in order to explore, through a kind of Geertzian “thick description,” the place of vocal communication in the Roman imaginary—tracing the highly intricate “web of meanings” (to
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use one of Geertz’s terms) that surrounds this god through ritual practice, social behavior, folk belief, and mythological representation. The analytical movement in this case runs from symbol to structure, asking how the diverse meanings of Hermes/Mercury as a cultural category manifest themselves throughout the Roman semiosphere. In “Argumentum,” on the other hand, Bettini reconstructs a cultural model that underwrites Roman society’s interest in and practice of the interpretation of signs—moving conversely from structure to symbol in explicating the Roman conception of inference from signs through an analysis of argumentum’s various senses and contexts.

By applying to the study of Roman society and culture the same anthropological “gaze” that Jean-Pierre Vernant and Marcel Detienne have dedicated so fruitfully to Greek culture, Bettini thus succeeds in offering original insights valuable to philologists, archaeologists, scholars of the literary tradition, historians, anthropologists and historians of art alike. In Part 1 (Mythology), for example, Bettini reconstructs a representative mythological story, demonstrating by comparison with beliefs and stories from other cultures how the legend of Brutus incorporates conventional themes and images of folklore—belying the still widespread belief that Roman culture eschewed the mythic and the fantastic. In the second part (Social Practices), Bettini looks at behavior and interaction in the public space, showing first how the Roman mores are a socially constructed category whose meaning varies according to what Maurice Halbwachs called “social frameworks,” then how Roman culture’s divergent metaphorical understandings of physical appearance in general and of the face in particular (os, vultus, forma, and so on) interact with what were perceived as the important traits of the “person” at Rome and the way in which this “person” was represented publically. Along with “Face to Face in Ancient Rome,” the three chapters that comprise the third part (Doubles and Images) return to the central theme of Bettini’s The Portrait of the Lover (University of California Press, 1999), namely, Roman society’s obsession with doubles and images. Whereas his previous focus was on the literary motif of the lover wooing the substitute image of his or her absent beloved, now Bettini addresses this unique aspect of Roman culture as it shapes Sosia’s interpretation of his encounter with his own Doppelgänger in Plautus’ Amphitruo; then through a reflection on the meaning of imaginés, effigies, and simulacra in Roman culture; and finally in relation to aristocratic funerary practices under the Republic.

Laura Gibbs produced early drafts of some chapters, which I then systematically revised and reworked to agree in style, tone and expression with my own translations of the remaining bulk of chapters. These were completed at various times and for various purposes, often because I found them germane to my own research. The English translation excludes some
chapters of the original Italian edition which were felt not to relate directly
to the book’s central thematic thread, while a more recent essay by Bettini
on “Death and Its Double” has been added to Part 3 as a contribution to
the field’s ongoing conversation about representations, and understandings,
of death in antiquity. At the author’s direction, all the chapters have been
newly revisited and re-edited, and in some places brought up to date, in
preparation for publication.

A final word, before I let the author speak for himself (as it were). It is
one of the pleasures of academic research to read Bettini’s work in Italian,
as he is as great a stylist as he is a scholar. I have a very distinct memory of
sitting down for the first time with this book, given to me as a gift by a fellow
student, and finding myself unable to put it aside. Perhaps because Bettini is
also an accomplished author of narrative fiction, his academic writing often
reads like a novel, the stories he weaves compelling you to turn page after
page. In these pages, Bettini illuminates a world that is, as he reminds us,
in many ways similar, but more often very different from our own. In my
translation I have tried to capture the newness and excitement of visiting this
world through his prose. My wish, therefore—perhaps a coin, and a whisper
into the ears of Hermes will grant it—is that he speaks through me without
any sense that I have validated that well known Italian caveat of “traduttore,
travitore.” If it is Bettini’s own voice that you hear across these pages, I will
have succeeded.

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