Foreword

The aim of this book is to devise a method for approaching the problem of presence in Hellenistic and Roman poetry. The problem of presence, as defined here, is the problem of the availability or accessibility to the reader of the fictional worlds disclosed by poetry. Responding to the problem of presence, it is argued, is an integral part of the experience of reading Hellenistic and Roman poetry, and theorising this problem is essential if we are to approach an understanding of the experience of poetic reading (and yet the act of theorising cannot ultimately be dissociated from the poetic experience itself). ‘The fiction of occasion’ is proposed as a new conceptual tool for approaching the problem of presence in a more immediate and positive way than is possible with the methods and frameworks currently prevalent in the field. Its purpose is to elucidate how poetry can produce aesthetic effects of presence without relying on narrativity.

The introduction offers an exposition in medias res of the problem of presence by way of Catullus c. 4, which features a boat inexplicably endowed with the power of speech and delivering a discourse in a radically underdetermined context. This prompts the question of how a reader can possibly imagine herself in relation to this anomalous act of speech, which in turn serves as a preface to the problem of presence.

Chapter 1, ‘Rethinking mimetic poetry and Callimachus’ Hymn to Apollo’, interrogates the theory of ‘mimetic poetry’ as applied to its central exemplar, Callimachus’ Hymn to Apollo. This serves as an occasion to survey the current status of the problem of presence in the study of Hellenistic and Roman poetry and to thereby chart the conceptual territory which the idea of the fiction of occasion is meant to occupy. The discussion concludes by advocating a move away from certain narratological precepts as well as from the dichotomy of orality and literacy, and a turn towards a new appreciation of the structural role of epiphany in this and similar poems.

Chapter 2, ‘Figuring occasion in Propertius 4.6 and Bion’s Adonis’, takes the two poems named in its title as examples of how the fiction of occasion works through sustained formal devices, or ‘figures’. Propertius 4.6 uses the figure of the path of song to guide the reader through the experience of mentally surveying the monumental space of the bay of Actium. Bion’s Lament for Adonis, on the other hand, employs refrain-like repetitions and plaintive apostrophes to coax the reader into a kind of sympathetic communion with the bereaved Aphrodite at the moment of her lover Adonis’ death.

Chapter 3, ‘Occasion and presence in Horace, Odes I’, takes a focussed look at a single poet, using poems 9, 12, and 20 of the first book of Odes to elucidate
Horace’s specifically lyric approach to the fiction of occasion. The key argument here is that Horace finds a way to articulate the problem of presence dialectically, so that competing modes of presence can be felt within the frame of a single poem.

Chapter 4, ‘Occasioning the choral in Horace, Odes IV’, turns from the first to the last book of Horatian lyric, which is preoccupied at a number of key junctures with the idea of choral song or other forms of collective voicing. This chapter feeds this often-noted peculiarity of the final book of Odes directly into the fiction of occasion, arguing through readings of odes 1, 2, 5, 6, and 15 that what these poems are really concerned with is the fantasy of the collective voice as a privileged node of lyric presence.

Finally, the conclusion offers a recap of some of the central goals which unify each of the discussions, followed by a prospectus of possible futures to which the ideas pursued in this book may potentially lead.