CHAPTER 1

Gorgias and the Justice of Tragic Apatē

As reported by Plutarch, Gorgias claimed that tragedy generates 'a deception, in which the one who deceives is more just than the one who does not deceive, and the one who is deceived is more intelligent than the one who is not deceived' (ἀπάτην, ἣν ὅ τ' ἀπατήσας δικαιότερος τοῦ μὴ ἀπατήσαντος καὶ ὁ ἀπατηθεὶς σοφώτερος τοῦ μὴ ἀπατηθέντος, fr. B 23 DK). The parallelism and polyptoton render the paradox of a just deceiver and his intelligent victim poignant. We do not know the original context of this assessment of tragedy, whether it was an isolated quip or belonged to an extended discussion, perhaps even a poetological treatise, but Gorgias fr. B 23 DK is generally seen as an important step from the traditional condemnation of poets as liars towards the theory of poetry as fictional in Aristotle's *Poetics*.[1]

There is, however, more to Gorgias' qualification of tragedy as *apatē*: it pinpoints an entanglement of aesthetics with ethics which – this is the thesis of *The Ancient Aesthetics of Deception* – is an important, if neglected hub of reflection throughout antiquity. Gorgias fr. B 23 DK uses an ethical term, deception, for an aesthetic phenomenon, aesthetic illusion. Reinforced through the collocation with 'more just' (δικαιότερος), the basic ethical meaning of *apatē* renders Gorgias' claim about the effect of tragedy on the audience paradoxical. This oscillation of *apatē* between deception and aesthetic illusion is not confined to Gorgias nor is it a mere stepping-stone on the way to Aristotle's *Poetics*; as I wish to demonstrate in this book, a wide range of Greek authors interested in the dynamics of aesthetic experience exploit the ambiguity of *apatē* from the Classical to the Imperial eras.

This temporal scope, as well as the concentration on *apatē*'s entanglement of aesthetics with ethics, sets off this book from the numerous studies

[1] Willi 2002: 120, for example, notes that the understanding of *apatē* as realist illusion crystallizes the 'paradigmatic change that literary criticism underwent during the last quarter of the fifth century'.

of the idea of 'poetic lies' in the Archaic and in some cases also the Classical age.[2] To avoid misunderstanding, let me also emphasize that *The Ancient Aesthetics of Deception* is not a study in *Begriffsgeschichte*. Far from systematically tracing occurrences of *apatē*, I will home in on selected texts that use *apatē* to entwine aesthetics with ethics. *Apatē* is not equally prominent in all of my texts, but in all cases its lexical ambiguity captures an entanglement of aesthetic illusion with deception that is at the core of their understanding of aesthetic experience. There are other intriguing terms in the vicinity of *apatē*, for example *mētis*, *peithō* and *dolos*. None of them, however, is used to blend together deception and aesthetic illusion in the same way. They will therefore enter my discussion only in so far as they help to qualify *apatē*.

It is striking that, while some dictionaries offer only 'deceit', 'treachery' etc. as a translation of *apatē*, others also list 'aesthetic illusion' or something similar as an additional, distinct meaning.[3] Whereas the latter assume a transfer of meaning to another domain that results in a new significance,[4] the former would consider the application of *apatē* to the effects of representations a 'living' metaphor. The disagreement of the dictionaries indicates that the lexicographic ascription of a single meaning to each occurrence of *apatē* is less than helpful for the subject of my inquiry. We will encounter cases in which *apatē* straightforwardly signifies either 'deception' or 'aesthetic illusion', but I am chiefly interested in texts that use *apatē* to signify aesthetic illusion while keeping its ethical meaning active. In terms of cognitive linguistics, my investigation is concerned with metaphorical blending, specifically the blending of elements of the domain of ethics and elements of the domain of aesthetics.[5]

What exactly is the difference between deception and aesthetic illusion? The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'to deceive' as, among other things,

[2] See, e.g., Puelma 1989; Pratt 1993; Finkelberg 1998; Ford 2002; Ioli 2018.

[3] While *LSJ* gives only 'trick, fraud, deceit' and 'guile, treachery', *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* also has 'Die (angenehme) Illusion (im Theater Udgl)' with a reference to Gorg. fr. 23 B DK and other texts. *Passow* also gives 'Zeitvertreib, Ergötzlichkeit, Vergnügen, sinnliche Anlockung, Sinnenlust, Spät. von Polyb. an' (*Pape* is similar); *Montanari* lists 'inganno, froda, tradimento, illusione'. On the etymology of *apatē*, see, in addition to the etymological lexica, Kastner 1977.

[4] This would be an instance of terminologization, that is, the coining of a technical term on the basis of a general term. On technical languages in Classical Greece, see, for example, Willi 2003: 51–95, who concludes that 'by the end of the fifth century technical discourse was only just developing' (87–94 on the language of literary criticism).

[5] On blending theory, see, for example, Fauconnier and Turner 1996; Grady, Oakley and Coulson 1999. Zanker 2019: 1–21 provides a lucid introduction to conceptual metaphor theory and the idea of blending from the perspective of a Classicist.

'to cause to believe what is false; to mislead as to a matter of fact, lead into error, impose upon, delude, "take in"'. Aesthetic illusion, on the other hand,

> conveys the impression of being imaginatively and emotionally immersed in a represented world, or parts thereof, and of experiencing this world, which may be factual or fictional but in any case not really present at the very moment of reception, in a way similar to real life, while the recipient is still residually aware that this experience is imaginative and triggered by an artefact and not by reality. Aesthetic illusion can thus be described as a synthesis of dominant immersion and residual distance – a distance which keeps it from turning altogether into delusion.[6]

This last point is crucial: whereas deception makes one believe what is false, aesthetic illusion is predicated on an awareness of attending to a representation, not reality.

The word *apatē* illustrates that, despite the differences, there is a tendency in ancient writers to associate aesthetic illusion with deception. My book is an inquiry into this association and its specific entwinement of aesthetics with ethics. This focus brings with it limitations: I cannot, and do not intend to, treat fully the notion of aesthetic experience or the ethical dimension of representations. The latter, in particular, has many facets that are not linked to aesthetic illusion. Just think, for instance, of epic reflections on violence or tragedy's probing into the responsibility of agents. Leaving aside these and many other issues, my discussion of the ethics of representations is confined to deception that is conveyed by aesthetic illusion. As we will see, ancient authors meditated on the use of immersion to trick somebody into believing what is false and, more perniciously, on the moral corruption inherent in immersion itself. It also deserves to be pointed out that aesthetic experience encompasses other aspects in addition to aesthetic illusion. In poetry, for example, rhythm or patterns of sound may spellbind the audience while distracting them from the represented world. Intellectual reflection is another potential part of aesthetic experience, one that, in fact, often targets ethical questions. The chapters to follow, however, will be concerned exclusively with aesthetic illusion and its relation to deception.

Narrow as my focus may appear, it directs us, I contend, to a strand of ancient aesthetics that, while widely ignored in scholarship, turns out to be

[6] Wolf 2013a: v.

powerful as well as intriguing once it has been recognized.[7] The concept of *mimēsis* stands at the centre of the major narrative of ancient aesthetics. As Halliwell magisterially showed, *mimēsis*, poised between representing and construing worlds, was key to ancient reflections on aesthetics with strong echoes in the modern era.[8] However, underneath this Apollonian tradition focusing on the relation between representations and the world, there is the uncanny idea of *apatē*, which contemplates the effect of representations on its recipients.[9] In some cases, the mighty stream of *mimēsis* absorbed the term *apatē* after draining its ethical significance, but until the Imperial era ancient authors continue to engage with *apatē*'s disturbing crossing of ethics and aesthetics. What rendered *apatē* so fruitful was not least its combination of two prominent foci of ancient reflections, first the focus on the powerful resonance of verbal and iconic representations with recipients, and second the focus on the moral dimension, especially of poetry. This book is driven by the wish to recover this strand of reflections that has been buried under the idea of *mimēsis*; it is the attempt to tease out at least some of the facets of the ancient aesthetics of deception.

A key figure in the history of *apatē* as an aesthetic term is Plato. As I will suggest, Plato takes up Gorgias' playful entwinement of aesthetics with ethics in the *Republic* and gives it a more serious spin, which was to unfold its full power in the Imperial era. That being said, Plato's presence is not equally strong in all authors, and some of the texts discussed in the book have no Platonic debts. My investigation tries not so much to sketch the straight trajectory of a tradition as to capture the variegated reflections that cluster around the gravitational centre of *apatē*'s lexical ambiguity. *The Ancient Aesthetics of Deception* is not a pure history of ideas but tries to situate the individual reconfigurations of *apatē* in their socio-cultural

[7] See, however, Süß 1910 and Pohlenz 1920, who recognize the significance of Gorgias fr. B 23 DK, but while they make interesting observations about its relevance for poetics in the Classical era, their approach is marred by the speculative assumption that it was part of a full-blown poetological treatise which was the major source for Aristophanes' *Frogs*. Moreover, neither Süß nor Pohlenz realize the post-Classical importance of *apatē* as an aesthetic concept, especially in the Imperial period.

[8] Halliwell 2002.

[9] Halliwell 2002: 16 acknowledges that the tradition of *mimēsis* is concerned not only 'with the status of artistic works or performances' but also 'with the experiences they invite or make available'. More specifically, he notes that in some texts 'mimesis becomes associated with ideas that sometimes cluster around the motif of artistic "deception" – a motif fated to be picked up and given new force by Plato, and one that continues to resurface periodically' (20 with n. 49). And yet, I hope that my discussion of texts outside the scope of Halliwell's study and the different perspective on texts also covered by Halliwell show that there is an ancient aesthetics of deception which, in some instances, forges ties with the concept of *mimēsis*, but, on the whole, is a distinct strand of reflection worthy of our attention.

contexts. While avoiding the pitfall of reductionist explanations that relate critical positions causally to the place and function of art and literature in society, I will envisage views of *apatē* as responses to the role that verbal and iconic representations played for their creators and recipients.

The subsequent chapters cover a wide range of texts from the Classical to the Imperial eras belonging to different genres. Like other scholars working on ancient aesthetics, I not only tackle works of criticism but also include texts that we would classify as literary. Homer's *Odyssey* and Aristophanes' *Frogs*, for example, are staples in inquiries in ancient aesthetics.[10] Intriguing articulations of the aesthetics of deception can be found in texts that so far have not attracted attention from aestheticians. While, for instance, Sophocles' *Electra*, as I wish to show, dramatizes *apatē*'s entanglement of deception and aesthetic illusion, Heliodorus' *Ethiopica* will be read as a breathtaking narrative engagement with Plato's anxiety about poetic enticement. The variety of the texts discussed in this book attests the salience of the aesthetics of deception in ancient Greece.

The modern repercussions of the ancient aesthetics of deception are far weaker than those of *mimēsis*, and yet *apatē* holds, I think, a particular appeal for us today. Its emphasis on the strong effects of representations on recipients resonates with the current upsurge of cognitive approaches to art and literature.[11] Cognitive evidence permits us to reassess ancient ideas that have been ignored or dismissed by Classicists. Gorgias' appraisal of the power of *logos* in *Helen*, for instance, tends to be considered hyperbolic or a playful exercise, but embodied approaches to cognition prompt us to take seriously the physiological dimension of responses to verbal representation broached by Gorgias. Another even more prominent case in point is Plato's critique of poetry in the *Republic*, which has been vehemently condemned by a wide range of scholars from different disciplines and all sorts of camps. However, viewed in the light of cognitive research, Plato's take on the strong effects of mere representations appears insightful. In fact, as I will argue, an important form of contemporary psychotherapy can, most surprisingly, be shown to be premised on ideas that were central to Plato's banning of the poets.

[10] For the *Odyssey*, see, e.g., Halliwell 2011: 36–92; Peponi 2012; for the *Frogs*, see, e.g., Hunter 2009: 10–52; Halliwell 2011: 93–154.

[11] Zunshine 2015, a handbook of cognitive literary approaches, can provide a first orientation in a rapidly expanding field. Troscianko 2014 and Cave 2016 are among the noteworthy individual studies.

That being said, in this dialogue with cognitive studies, Classics will not only be at the receiving end. On account of their experimental basis, cognitive studies tend to focus on the present, but cognition has a history that awaits its exploration.[12] While ancient audiences and viewers cannot, of course, be interviewed or subjected to MRI (magnetic resonance imaging), ancient literature and criticism provide us with intriguing meditations on responses to art and literature that invite comparison with the results of cognitive research.[13] *Apatē*, as I hope to show, is a key concept of ancient reflections on chiefly verbal, but also iconic representations and their resonances with audiences and viewers. I will argue that these reflections feature highly nuanced observations on the embodied and enactive nature of cognition in particular.

Traditional accounts envisage aesthetics as a domain that emerges by becoming independent of ethical and other non-aesthetic considerations.[14] However, theoreticians have become sensitive to the fundamental ethical ramifications of aesthetics as well as to the aesthetic dimension of ethics. In a much-discussed monograph, Levine, for example, examines how forms, notably wholes, rhythms, hierarchies and networks, structure not only cultural products but also political interactions.[15] Even analytical philosophers, not known for the wilful breaching of disciplinary boundaries, have come to discuss the moral ramifications of aesthetics.[16] The various forms of exploiting *apatē*'s lexical ambiguity in antiquity open up an illuminating horizon for the newly awakened interest in the intersection between ethics and aesthetics.

The ancient association of aesthetic illusion with deception not only chimes with scholarly concerns, it also has political significance in the present. This significance tends to be disturbing: the use of compelling narratives and images as a means of post-factual disinformation gives substance to the ancient anxiety about the ethical implications of

[12] For some first attempts to make ancient material fruitful for a history of cognition, see Anderson, Cairns and Sprevak 2019.

[13] For an attempt to triangulate ancient narrative, ancient criticism and cognitive theory, see Grethlein, Huitink and Tagliabue 2019.

[14] Kristeller 1951, 1952 is a particularly influential teleological account of the emergence of aesthetics as an independent field. Porter 2009a and 2009b, the latter a response to Shiner 2009, offers a compelling critique of Kristeller's thesis that the idea of aesthetics did not crystallize until 1800. Porter's investigations of aesthetic thought in the Archaic age (2010a) and the idea of the sublime (2016) are welcome antidotes to teleological approaches to aesthetics in antiquity. On the question of whether there was aesthetics in antiquity, see also the contributions to Platt and Squire 2010.

[15] Levine 2015, on which see the forum in *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association* 132(5).

[16] E.g., Levinson 1998; Carroll 2001.

representations.[17] The ancient reflections clustering around *apatē* obviously appear in cultural and medial contexts that are remote from ours. Today, it is not least the deployment of digital technologies for the creation and circulation of enticing but fake representations that renders worrisome the entanglement of aesthetic illusion with deception. And yet, it is precisely the differences that make the ancient material interesting to 'think with'.

The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to a closer examination of the text from which my inquiry takes its cue: Gorgias fr. B 23 DK. After contemplating the fragment in its original contexts – Plutarch cites it in two different treatises – I will argue that Gorgias' assertion derives its poignancy from the transformation of several topoi. What reads like a mere witticism is the result of a crossing of an epistemological tradition with an ethical paradox and a poetological premise, all under the auspices of aesthetics. Before, however, beginning with the analysis of Gorgias fr. B 23 DK, let me give a synopsis of the subsequent chapters and outline the course that my investigation will steer.

In Chapter 2, I first present other texts from the Classical period that use *apatē* to signify the effect of theatre and other forms of representation. These texts give evidence for the wide circulation of *apatē* as an aesthetic term, perhaps – this is my tentative suggestion – as a result of a Gorgianic coinage. Then, I critically examine the tendency to view Gorgias fr. B 23 DK merely as paving the way for Aristotle's *Poetics*. This view is in danger of confounding aesthetic illusion with fictionality and ignores the salience of *apatē*'s enmeshing of aesthetics with ethics.

Deceit plays a major role in Sophocles' *Electra*, the subject of Chapter 3. As I will argue, the messenger scene at the core of this play blends deception with aesthetic illusion – the lie of the *paedagogus* about Orestes' death relies on a highly immersive narration to be analysed from an embodied and enactive perspective. It would be more than bold to envisage *Electra* as inspired by Gorgias fr. 23 DK; what Sophocles' play does is show that the association of deception and aesthetic illusion pinpointed by Gorgias was somehow in the air and could be exploited to great dramatic effect. I will also suggest that *Electra* features reflections on aesthetic illusion that contain seeds for the later rhetorical category of *enargeia*.

[17] The bibliography on the post-factual is already immense and continues to grow at rapid speed. Incisive observations can be found, e.g., in D'Ancona 2017 and McIntyre 2018. For an attempt to envisage the idea of the post-factual in the light of ancient material, see Grethlein 2019a.

Plato is not only a key figure in the history of the aesthetics of deception; the focus of my study also permits us to reassess his criticism of poetry in the *Republic*. Chapter 4 examines how Plato takes seriously Gorgias' playful entwinement of aesthetics with ethics and uses it to give new substance to the charges against poetry that Gorgias had deflated. For Plato, immersion is a central factor in the harm done by poets. After exploring his entanglement of aesthetic illusion with the corruption of the soul, I consider passages that seem to respond to Gorgias and help us capture the similarities and differences between the two thinkers. Finally, I contend that, while unanimously condemned by a broad alliance of scholars, Plato's view of poetry is premised on an assessment of aesthetic experience that turns out to be valid when seen in the light of cognitive studies.

Hellenistic criticism provides little material for my study; Chapter 5 tries to grasp why this is due not only to its scanty transmission. Neither critics who championed pleasure as the function of poetry nor the ekphrastic tradition seem to have taken an interest in *apatē*'s ambiguity. We find more evidence at the beginning of the Imperial era, in the critical essays of Dionysius of Halicarnassus and in Philo's polemics against a specific kind of rhetoric and myth. Only Philo, however, exploits *apatē*'s oscillation between aesthetic illusion and deception. Philo's debts to Plato help us identify one reason for *apatē*'s decline in Hellenistic criticism: as some scholia illustrate, Plato's criticism of poetry was well-known but was often felt to be less compelling than the ideas of other philosophical schools. With due caution, I also suggest that the waning interest in *apatē* is related to the emergence of the Hellenistic book culture that made it easy to contemplate aesthetic issues independently of ethical issues.

Plutarch's *de audiendis poetis*, to be discussed in Chapter 6, is one of the first testimonies to the resuscitation of *apatē* as a critical term in the Imperial era. In defending the educational function of poetry, Plutarch responds to Plato. While Plutarch's positive view disagrees with Plato's negative verdict, his argument, as I will contend, is predicated on Plato's association of immersion with corruption. Plutarch, after acknowledging poetry's spell, lays out a strongly reflexive mode of reading intended to render the young readers immune to the dangers of absorption. His agenda has been appraised as prefiguring the modern hermeneutics of suspicion, but there are also important differences to be noted. Besides drawing our attention to the role of Plato, *De audiendis poetis* suggests further reasons for the appeal of *apatē* in the Imperial era, notably a culture of rhetorical *epideixis* that put a premium on captivating performances and

the socio-political function of literature for the Greek elites in the Roman empire that gave new prominence to its ethical dimension.

Chapter 7 moves on to Lucian, who extends the field of reflection by conjuring up the entwinement of deception with aesthetic illusion not exclusively, but chiefly in texts devoted to philosophy and its pretensions. *Philopseudes* uses the allure of superstitious tales circulated by philosophers to contemplate the effect of immersive narrative at large; *Nigrinus* calls upon the aesthetics of deception to expose the shortcomings of protreptic discourse and facile ideas of conversion; *Hermotimus* compares philosophical misguidance to the effects of visual art and poetry. However, Lucian's engagement with the aesthetics of deception is not confined to ridiculing philosophy; it is carried by a serious concern with the effects of *logos* as diagnosed by Plato. The high reflexivity that the form of dialogue and the layering of narrative levels generate in the texts discussed can be seen as a response to the danger inherent in immersion.

Imperial ekphrasis is the topic of Chapter 8. The disinterest in the aesthetics of deception in Hellenistic epigrams is continued in the ekphrastic works of Callistratus and the Philostrati. They use the term *apatē* not infrequently, but, by and large, do not tie aesthetic illusion to deception in an ethical sense. It is another text, commonly disregarded as simple and unsophisticated, that intriguingly plays with the ambiguity of *apatē*. I will argue that the *Tabula Cebetis*, besides toying with the recession of representational levels, also uses the personification Apatē in the painting it describes to associate aesthetic illusion with moral corruption, thereby issuing a reading instruction for itself. In fact, it can even be argued that in the *Tabula Cebetis* the aesthetics of deception, which Lucian had marshalled to criticize protreptics, helps pre-empt this criticism.

The ekphrastic play with verbal and iconic representations reveals that not only literature but also pictures can effect *apatē*. Chapter 9 is devoted to a piece of early Christian apologetic writing that cashes in on the ambiguity of *apatē* for an assault against pagan idolatry. Clement's *Protrepticus*, an interesting document for the multifaceted attempts of the early Christians to negotiate the relation of their faith with pagan culture, is couched in the language and imagery of the culture it is criticizing; it not only takes up specific theories of perception but also knowingly transfers the aesthetics of deception from poetry to pictures. While other apologetes assume that demons instrumentalize statues for their deception, Clement makes the capacity of iconic representation for deception itself a cornerstone of his deconstruction of pagan modes of viewing.

Heliodorus' *Ethiopica*, discussed in Chapter 10, still awaits its discovery by scholars of ancient aesthetics. The latest of the five fully preserved ancient Greek novels piercingly reflects on the aesthetics of deception. After a close reading of a passage from book three that sharply juxtaposes deceit and aesthetic illusion and simultaneously intimates their similarity, I will explore their blending together in the Athenian novella. The aesthetics of deception also pertains to the *Ethiopica* themselves, which are designed to enthral the reader and simultaneously threaten to dupe her. A Platonic intertext, which evokes the condemnation of poetry in the *Republic*, highlights this danger. At the same time, Heliodorus recasts the aesthetics of deception differently from Plato and suggests an allegorical reading of his novel that envisages aesthetic illusion ultimately as a means of overcoming deception.

Chapter 11 commences with an episode from Petronius, which illustrates that it would be rewarding to look for the aesthetics of deception in Latin literature. However, instead of staying within the temporal boundaries of antiquity, I conclude my inquiry with some contemporary spotlights. By no means did *apatē* have the reception history of *mimēsis*, and yet, I contend, its association of aesthetic illusion with deception has particular force in our world. After pointing out a significant shift of focus from the ancient to the present aesthetics of deception, I discuss examples from journalism, politics, art and psychotherapy that in various ways engage with immersion and deception.

1.1 Gorgias Fr. B 23 DK: Quotation and Meaning

Let us return to Gorgias fr. B 23 DK and take a closer look at it. As with many other quotations by ancient authors, it is difficult, if not impossible, to assess where the original text starts and ends and whether the reference, or parts of it, is a verbatim citation or a rephrasing. This is the full text of Plutarch, *De gloria Atheniensium* 348c:

> Tragedy flourished and was acclaimed – it was a marvellous spectacle for the ears and eyes of the men who lived in those times, which produced, by means of stories and sufferings, a deception, as Gorgias says, in which the one who deceives is more just than the one who does not deceive, and the one who is deceived is more intelligent than the one who is not deceived. For the one who deceives is more just because he has done what he has promised, and the one who is deceived is more intelligent, for whoever is not insensible is easily captured by the pleasure of words.