

PRODIKOS, ‘METEOROSOPHISTS’ AND THE ‘TANTALOS’ PARADIGM¹

Three famous sophists are referred to together in the *Apology of Sokrates* as still practising their enviably lucrative itinerant profession in 399 B.C. (not, by implication, in Athens): Gorgias of Leontinoi, Prodikos of Keos and Hippias of Elis.² The last of these was the least well known to the Athenian *demos*, having practised mainly in Dorian cities.³ There is no extant reference to him in Old Comedy, but we can assume that he was sufficiently famous – especially for his fees (possibly the highest charged by any sophist)⁴ – to justify his inclusion as the third of this ‘triad’; cf. the triad Protagoras – Hippias – Prodikos in the *Protagoras*, considered further below. Gorgias was by now a grand old man of about ninety (with more than a decade of active life still ahead of him),⁵ the last survivor of the first generation of fee-taking educators, associated first and foremost in the popular mind with the suspect arts of political and forensic persuasion.⁶ Prodikos and Hippias were probably in their sixties.⁷

For the jurors at Sokrates’ trial, Prodikos had been ‘the sophist’ *par excellence*; I say ‘had been’, since (especially if the following argument is well founded) he may not have been seen in Athens for a decade or more. The three references to him in Aristophanes, equivocally ‘admiring’ (*Clouds* 361, v. *inf.*, *Birds* 692) or pejorative (fr. 490, from the *Tagenistai*), show clearly his unique eminence, or notoriety: on the one hand as the ‘cosmological expert’ (‘Listen to *us*’, the Bird-Chorus exhort humanity in their prospectus, ‘and henceforth say goodbye to Prodikos’); on the other – admittedly in an unknown context – as the exemplary ‘corrupting babblers’ (‘This fellow has been corrupted either by some book or by Prodikos or some [other] ἀδολέσχη’).⁸ No sophist had enjoyed a more conspicuously lucrative practice in Athens during the Peloponnesian War. On official missions from Keos he had impressively addressed the *Boule*, and his rhetorical displays (ἐπιδείξεις) must have attracted as much public attention, at first or second hand, as those of Gorgias, during more frequent and longer periods of residence.⁹ His ‘50-drachma’ lecture-courses, available only to the wealthy, were ironically ‘admired’ by Sokrates and were presumably a byword among the

¹ I am greatly indebted to Sir Kenneth Dover, to whom I ventured to submit an earlier draft of this article; there are few places where his helpful comments have not caused at least some reformulation of my argument. I am grateful also to Dr N. J. Richardson and my colleague J. W. Roberts for encouragement and suggestions.

² Pl. *Apol.* 19e.

³ Pl. *Hipp. maj.* 281a.

⁴ Ib. 282e; the other main characteristics that appear in Plato’s treatment of Hippias are boastful self-advertisement and versatility. Cf. W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Sophists* (Cambridge, 1971 = *HGP* III, part I), pp. 281–2.

⁵ Guthrie, pp. 269 ff.

⁶ cf. Ar. *Birds* 1694, *Wasps* 420.

⁷ Guthrie, pp. 274, 280 n. 3 (against the view of M. Untersteiner that Hippias was born c. 443 B.C.).

⁸ τοῦτον τὸν ἄνδρ’ ἢ βιβλίον διέφθορεν|ἢ Πρόδικος ἢ τῶν ἀδολεσχῶν εἰς γέ τις (fr. 490 K.). τῶν ἀδολεσχῶν τις means ‘some prater, babblers’ (a standard use of τις with the gen. pl.); εἰς γέ τις emphasises ‘some’ (sc. ‘if not Prodikos’). See further on p. 28 with n. 25.

⁹ Pl. *Hipp. maj.* 282c: . . . πολλάκις μὲν καὶ ἄλλοτε δημοσίαι ἀφίκετο, ἅταρ τὰ τελευταῖα ἔναγχος ἀφικόμενος δημοσίαι ἐκ Κέω λέγων τ’ ἐν τῇ βουλῇ πάνυ ἡδوکίμησεν καὶ ἰδία ἐπιδείξει ποιούμενος καὶ τοῖς νέοις συνῶν χρήματα ἔλαβεν θανμαστὰ ὅσα.

polloi.¹⁰ More than most sophists, he seems to have made a special point of courting the sons of upper-class families (leaving to posterity the image of a man addicted to money and good living).¹¹ Like Protagoras before him, Prodikos included 'political *arete*' (with an emphasis on debating skills) as a major component in a comprehensive (partly 'cosmological') prospectus. According to Aiskhines of Sphettos, he had been the 'teacher' of the moderate oligarch Theramenes;¹² and, certainly, there was a strong oligarchic element in the elitist circles in which Prodikos moved. It is reasonable to suppose that his *modus operandi* played no small part in the build-up of popular hostility against 'sophists' as a class, on grounds partly social and political, partly religious. Educated Athenians, including the pious Xenophon, found much in Prodikos to admire;¹³ but even the laudatory references (expressions such as *ὁ σοφός*, *ὁ βέλτιστος*) tend to be equivocal, touched with irony.¹⁴ For Plato, Prodikos' most commendable contribution to philosophy lay in the field of semantics, in his insistence (easily parodied as pedantic) on the correct use of near-synonyms;¹⁵ an aspect of Prodikos' *σοφία* which can only have reinforced the plain man's antipathy towards 'sophism'.

The popular image of the typical sophist is familiar to us from the *Clouds*. As Sir Kenneth Dover has shown in his introduction to the play, the characteristics attached to Sokrates by Aristophanes are mostly those which belonged to sophists and/or intellectuals in general, as popularly conceived, rather than to the Sokrates of real life.¹⁶ To that I should add that the *arch-sophistic* 'Sokrates' satirised in the play is in several features (e.g. fee-taking, philological quibbling, heretical cosmology) specifically modelled on what we may take to have been the popular view of the arch-sophist Prodikos (*pace* Dover, v. *inf.*). In essence, *Clouds* is a part-humorous, part-serious satire on the New Education, presented before the Athenian *demos*, with Sokrates set in the foreground for two main reasons: (i) because he, unlike Prodikos and other prominent 'educators', was an Athenian citizen, and Old Comedy preferred citizen-targets; (ii) because his well-known appearance and mannerisms lent themselves to comic exploitation.

Clouds 360–2 is an important and revealing passage:

οὐ γὰρ ἂν ἄλλωι γ' ὑπακούσαιμεν τῶν νῦν μετεωροσοφιστῶν
πλὴν ἢ Προδίκωι, τῷ μὲν σοφίας καὶ γνώμης οὐνεκα, σοὶ δὲ
ὅτι βρενθῦει κτλ.

Given that 'Sokrates' was to embody, for the above reasons, all the satirised aspects of the New Education, it was desirable to *bracket* him in some way with the uniquely famous Prodikos (whom every Athenian knew to be the current occupier of the Chair of Sophism); the cosmological (and other) satire could then 'legitimately' proceed against Sokrates with no further mention of Prodikos. At the same time the reason given for elevating (*ad hoc*) the standing of Sokrates as 'the only other meteorosophist

¹⁰ Pl. *Crat.* 384b, Arist. *Rhet.* I 14. 1415b; Guthrie, p. 275.

¹¹ Philostr. *Vit. sophist.* 12; cf. Xen. *Symp.* 4. 62 (Sokrates refers ironically to Prodikos as 'χρημάτων δέομενον').

¹² Athen. 5. 220b; cf. Sch. Ar. *Nub.* 361. 'Teacher/pupil' relationships, beloved of commentators, need to be treated with caution; but this one seems likely at least to reflect a widespread contemporary opinion.

¹³ So, notably, in *Mem.* 2. 1. 21 ff., where Xenophon approves a Prodiorean moral allegory (of whose profundity opinions have differed – see Guthrie, p. 277 f.).

¹⁴ cf. also Pl. *Prot.* 341a, *Meno* 96d, *Charm.* 163d.

¹⁵ H. Mayer, *Prodikos von Keos und die Anfänge der Synonymik bei den Griechen* (Paderborn, 1913); cf. Guthrie, p. 276.

¹⁶ K. J. Dover, *Aristophanes Clouds* (Oxford, 1970), pp. xlix ff.

worth listening to' ('Prodikos for his intellectual prowess; you for your laughable manners') exploits the topsy-turvy logic characteristic of comedy, while aiming a personal jest (not unaffectionate in tone) at the familiar real-life Sokrates. Here Dover takes a very different view.¹⁷ The μέν/δέ antithesis is interpreted as a contrast between an authentic philosopher and a ridiculous quack, and, as such, both seriously intended and reflecting popular estimation of the two men. 'Prodikos was the most distinguished and respected intellectual of the day, and achieved in his lifetime (as Einstein did, uniquely, in this century) something like the "proverbial" status of a Thales'; and Aristophanes 'shared the popular esteem of Prodikos as an artist' (the *Tagenistai* fragment being merely the untypical 'grumble' of 'some very anti-intellectual character'). The inference of 'popular esteem' surely invites a raised eyebrow. The praise of Prodikos is spoken, not by Aristophanes *sua persona*, but by the Cloud-Chorus at a point in the play when they are committed advocates of new-fangled sophism. We may certainly judge that the expression 'Πρόδικος ὁ σοφός' was common parlance; but it remains likely that the admired σοφία and γνώμη ('cleverness' + 'thought')¹⁸ of Prodikos were at best *suspect* to the majority of Aristophanes' audience (and also likely that Aristophanes knew better than to regard the real-life Sokrates as a philosophical impostor, devoid of wisdom).

The phrase τῶν νῦν μετεωροσοφιστῶν alludes indirectly to former notorious φυσιολόγοι, notably Anaxagoras and Protagoras, to whom Prodikos (and the Sokrates of the play) are thought of as successors. The word μετεωροσοφίστης may or may not be a new coinage (it occurs nowhere else); it has an unmistakable satirical colour, following closely on the heels of μετεωροφένακας 333, though of course the Cloud-Chorus are able to use it 'admirably'.¹⁹ The *Clouds* ends with a violent condemnation, not specifically of Sokrates, but of the 'school' with which he has been associated, and a revealing summation of the (then) principal ground of popular hostility against the practitioners of the New Education:²⁰

τί γάρ μαθόντες τοὺς θεοὺς ὑβρίζετε,
καὶ τῆς σελήνης ἐσκοπεῖσθε τὴν ἔδραν;
δίωκε, παῖε, βάλλε πολλῶν οὐνεκα,
μάλιστα δ' εἰδὼς τοὺς θεοὺς ὡς ἡδίκουν. (Clouds 1506–9)

πολλῶν οὐνεκα rhetorically embraces all the various aspects of 'sophism' (touched on in the play) which the ordinary Athenian viewed with suspicion or detestation: excessive 'cleverness' with words, enabling the exponent to justify an unjust case, 'parasitism', 'corrupting the young', physical debilitation, and so forth. But the final emphasis is on the 'hubris' of the φυσιολόγοι against 'the gods'. The famous line

ἀεροβατῶ καὶ περιφρονῶ τὸν ἥλιον (Ib. 225, 1503)

reappears in the final scene, satirically spoken by Strepsiades as the Phrontisterion is set on fire; a memorable verse (and image) – a self-definition, as it were, of the 'meteorosophist' who 'walks on air' and impugns the divinity of the sun (and other heavenly bodies, symbolic of traditional sanctities). We can see from *Apology* 18b how this formulation passed into popular 'myth' in a manner seriously damaging to Sokrates.

¹⁷ Ib. lv.

¹⁸ Dover 'artistry' + 'intelligence' (less naturally, I think). Perhaps we need not split hairs here; σοφία καὶ γνώμη is simply a hendiadys for 'intellectual prowess'.

¹⁹ cf. μετεωροκοπεῖν *Peace* 92, μετεωρολέσχης *Pl. Rep.* 489c, μετεωρολόγοι *E. fr.* 913. 2, etc.

²⁰ cf. V. Ehrenberg, *The People of Aristophanes* (Blackwell, 1943), pp. 198–9.

It is hard to believe that the 'arch-meteorosophist' Prodikos was not tarred with the same brush as Sokrates (and with more justice) in respect of 'atheism'. We need not here concern ourselves with the details (some controversial) of his humanistic thought, in which he was a follower of Protagoras.²¹ He may or may not have purveyed the specifically 'Anaxagorean' heresy (the notorious description of the sun as a 'fiery rock')²² within a more general interest in Nature (*φύσις*) and natural phenomena, paraded as a comprehensive expertise (without, it would seem, any real claim to originality in this field).²³ The common man cared little for nice distinctions of doctrine (commonly using the adjective '*atheos*' as an imprecise pejorative). Later antiquity, at least, had no hesitation in including Prodikos' name in short lists of 'atheists'.²⁴ Dover suggests that at the date of *Clouds* 'perhaps he had not yet committed himself to the rationalistic doctrines attributed to him [B5]'. But there is no need for such a 'saving' postulate (except on Dover's interpretation of *Clouds* 360 ff.). It is obviously more probable that Prodikos had already said and done enough to establish for himself a reputation in the eyes of the ordinary Athenian as another pernicious 'atheist' after the pattern of Anaxagoras and Protagoras (both of whom had eventually been driven from Athens). And it is natural to regard the *Tagenistai* fragment as reflecting that popular view: the 'corrupting book' envisaged puts us in mind of the writings of Anaxagoras and Protagoras; the 'corrupting' effect of Prodikos and other *ἀδολεσχαί* is thought of as similar, but their medium is the spoken word.²⁵

Dover rightly rejects, as unsupported by any early evidence, the statement of Suda π 2365 (after a scholiast on Pl. *Rep.* 600c) that Prodikos drank the hemlock as *διαφθείρων τοὺς νέους*.²⁶ Still alive at the time of Sokrates' condemnation, Prodikos is unlikely to have revisited Athens after such a discouraging event. But that he was *accused* of 'corrupting the young' is entirely consonant with the evidence. I am not suggesting (nor am I denying) that he may have been actually prosecuted in a court of law. He would have been at risk, I should judge, in the witch-hunting atmosphere of the restored democracy in 410–9 B.C.;²⁷ but we do not know whether he was then in Athens (or ever, from about then onwards). A mere threat of prosecution would have sufficed to send him elsewhere. Influential friends (one thinks of Theramenes) probably made it possible for him to continue practising in Athens for a while after the expulsion of Diagoras of Melos for 'verbal impiety' (c. 415–14 B.C.?). but his profession was in its nature itinerant, and there were many other cities in which he could purvey his 50-drachma courses.

So far I have done little more than set some a priori considerations and speculations against Dover's view of Prodikos as a latter-day 'Thales' basking in the warm glow

²¹ Guthrie, pp. 238, 279; M. Untersteiner, *The Sophists* (Oxford, 1954, tr. Kathleen Freeman), pp. 209 ff.

²² Diog. Laert. 2. 8; cf. G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1957), pp. 362 ff., and J. Mansfeld, 'The Chronology of Anaxagoras' Athenian Period and the date of his trial', *Mnemosyne* 32 (1979), 39 ff., and 33 (1980), 17 ff.

²³ For Prodikos' reputation as a 'natural philosopher', cf. Guthrie, p. 277.

²⁴ Sext. *Math.* 9. 51, Cicero *ND* 1. 118; cf. Guthrie, pp. 236 ff. ('all antiquity' on p. 241 goes too far).

²⁵ Dr Richardson points out to me that Pfeiffer (*Hist. Class. Schol.* 1. 30) understood 'a book or Prodikos' as a joke about the 'bookish' character of this sophist. He was evidently wrong – Prodikos is paradigmatic rather of the *ἀκόλαστος γλῶττα*; cf. n. 8 above.

²⁶ In his valuable article 'The freedom of the intellectual in Greek Society' (*Talanta* 7 (1976), 24–54), Dover somewhat superfluously allows that Prodikos may have been executed somewhere other than at Athens and for some other offence (p. 42).

²⁷ cf. W. S. Ferguson, *Cambridge Ancient History* v (1927, 1969), pp. 348–52.

of popular esteem. But let us now re-examine perhaps the best known of all the references to Prodikos in extant literature.

τὸν δὲ μέτ' εἰσενόησα, ἔφη Ὀμηρος... καὶ μὲν δὴ καὶ Τάνταλον γε εἰσεῖδον· ἐπιδημεῖ γὰρ ἄρα καὶ Πρόδικος ὁ Κεῖος· ἦν δὲ ἐν οἰκῇματί τινι κτλ. (Plato, *Protagoras* 315b, c)

According to Plato, writing c. 390 B.C., Prodikos had been one of the notable sophists gathered at the house of Kallias about a generation earlier (more exact dating should not be demanded; anachronism shows the *Protagoras* to be an imaginative fictional 'retrospect').²⁸ The description of Prodikos in *Prot.* 315c ff. is the culminating third of a trio of 'sightings' humorously narrated by Sokrates. Earlier (314b–c) Sokrates had said to his companion: 'So let us now go (to Kallias' house): for not only Protagoras is here, but also Hippias of Elis and (I think) Prodikos of Keos too, and many other *sophoi*'. They have duly entered the house, reluctantly admitted by a surly janitor, and come upon the three savants in the order stated. Protagoras is seen at once in the near side of the cloister, pacing to and fro flanked by an obsequious 'chorus'. 'After him' (with the first Homeric allusion) Hippias is observed 'enthroned' in the opposite colonnade, expounding answers to 'astronomical questions about nature and the heavens' (τὰ μετέωρα). And thirdly Sokrates reports the 'sighting' of 'Tantalos *also*', confirming the previously supposititious presence of Prodikos in Athens: there he was (sure enough) in a treasure-chamber converted to use as a guest-room, still cosily lying in bed (wrapped up in *many* sheepskins) while holding forth in a 'heavy' (loud, deep) voice to a select audience – the βόμβος, however, preventing Sokrates from understanding what this 'πάσσοφος and θεῖος' sage was talking about.

The Homeric formula τὸν δὲ μέτ' εἰσενόησα (*Od.* 11. 572, 601) echoes the passage in which Odysseus introduces *tableaux* of some famous persons in the Underworld, while looking forward to the culminating echo of *Od.* 11. 582 (καὶ μὴν Τάνταλον εἰσεῖδον...) in the reference to Prodikos as 'Tantalos'. The modification of the Odyssean wording here (καὶ μὲν δὴ καὶ for καὶ μὴν and the addition of γε) is significant:²⁹ (a) strengthening the 'progressive' point, with a confirmation of 'also' (reflecting 314c οἶμαι δὲ καὶ Πρόδικος, and associated with ἐπιδημεῖ γὰρ ἄρα καί...); (b) underlining Τάνταλον both as the carefully-prepared culmination of the sequence (whereas in *Od.* 11 the Tantalos-tableau comes in the middle of a series, between Tityos and Sisyphos) and as the ironically apt 'sobriquet' of the Keian sage. Plainly the 'Tantalos' point is anything but a jibe *en passant*, coming as it does as the emphasised climax of an elaborately witty narrative, in which Sokrates ironically presents himself as an 'Odysseus' who has gained admission to an 'Other World' (even the Charon-like doorman plays an appropriate part). We can say that, in popular imagination, Tantalos was *the* characteristic sight one might see if one was vouchsafed a glimpse of the Underworld; but to explain the point thus would explain nothing, for the scene is an 'underworld' precisely because of the culminating glimpse of 'Tantalos' which Sokrates is vouchsafed. There is a suggestion of three quasi-mythical 'emblematic persons' in the triadic treatment, but it would obviously be incorrect to infer specific identifications of Protagoras and Hippias with other persons in the *Nekyia*. At the same time it can be inferred that Prodikos was a specially interesting person to Plato's readers, earning special (climactically 'mythical') treatment even in a dialogue primarily concerned with his senior, Protagoras.

²⁸ The *Protagoras* begins with an 'ideal date' prior to the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War; at 327d the 'ideal date' has become 419 B.C.

²⁹ cf. J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (Oxford, 1934), p. 397.

What now are we to make of the sobriquet? For the canonical interpretation, one naturally looks to W. K. C. Guthrie (*The Sophists*, p. 274; my italics): ‘To any reader of Plato, the name of Prodicus inevitably recalls, before anything else, the picture of ‘the unhappy professor, “suffering grievous pains” as the sobriquet Tantalus suggests’. Commentators make a point of citing *Od.* 11. 582 in full, including the words κρατέρ’ (or χαλέπ’) ἄλγε’ ἔχοντα, and remind us of the Odyssean picture of the elderly sinner standing in a lake, unable to drink, under fruit-laden trees, unable to eat; also of the passage in the *Cratylus* (395e), where an etymological connection (not the only one) is suggested between the name Τάνταλος and τάλαντατος ‘most wretched’. On the strength of that, J. and A. M. Adam were content to assure the reader that ‘Prodicus is compared to Tantalus because of his physical wretchedness’.³⁰

This feebly unconvincing interpretation has held the field for too long.³¹ The ‘extreme misfortune’ of which Tantalos was paradigmatic (among other things) had nothing to do with physical infirmity; and there is no evidence at all to suggest that Prodikos – an itinerant, politically active, long-lived and loud-voiced sophist – was (already in his thirties) a chronic invalid. The words κρατέρ’ ἄλγε’ ἔχοντα are not included in Sokrates’ (otherwise transmuted) citation of *Od.* 11. 582; nor is the *tableau* a description of a man ‘suffering torments’. Prodikos is not ‘bedridden’ but ‘still in bed’ (ἔτι κατέκειτο), luxuriating in his ‘many sheepskins’, at a time when less comfort-loving men have long been on their feet.

For the aptness of the sobriquet we must plainly look elsewhere and consider other aspects of the mythological Tantalos. There is no lack of paradigmatic features relevant to our inquiry.³²

(i) Before he became τάλαντατος, Tantalos was a nonpareil of enviable felicity (cf. Pind. *Ol.* 1. 54 ff.). In Euripides’ *Orestes* he is introduced as ὁ μακάριος (*Or.* 4). Name-etymologies more often associated him with τάλαντα ‘riches’ than with ‘misfortune’.³³ ‘As rich as Tantalos’ and ‘as rich as Kroisos’ were equivalent expressions in reference to a nabob. Prodikos might almost have been nicknamed ‘Tantalos’ by Athenians or by Sokrates/Plato for that reason alone; except that the wealth of Hippias was scarcely less ‘enviable’. Note that the *tableau* presents him in a ταμειῶν.

(ii) Tantalos was usually described as a Phrygian or Lydian, and his proverbial wealth, like that of Kroisos, Midas, Gyges etc., was inseparably associated with oriental ἀβροσύνη (‘luxury, love of pleasure, softness, refinement’).³⁴ In *Orestes* 348–51 it is the ἀβροσύνη of Menelaos as he enters (returning ‘royally’ from Asia) that makes him for the Chorus ‘visibly of the blood of the Tantalidai’.³⁵ It is ἀβροσύνη

³⁰ J. and A. M. Adam, *Platonis Protagoras* (Cambridge, 1893), p. 95.

³¹ No one seems to have doubted that Prodikos is satirised as ‘τὸν τάλαντατον’. Guthrie was obviously dissatisfied by a (tasteless) jibe about ‘physical infirmity’, but could offer nothing better than the suggestion that P. was ‘inclined to a gloomy view’ of life (p. 280); a singularly unconvincing explanation of the sobriquet, even on the assumption that P.’s view was abnormally ‘gloomy’. H. Gomperz (*Sophistik und Rhetorik* (1912; Darmstadt, 1965), pp. 90–125) had elaborated a similar position by guessing that P. had notoriously compared the miserable life of man with the sufferings of Tantalos.

³² See, in general, Roscher *Lex.* 5. 75–86; Kerényi, *Heroes*, pp. 57–61, gives a useful (if somewhat indiscriminating) mythographic synthesis.

³³ Pl. *Euthyph.* 11d τὰ Ταντάλου χρήματα; cf. Anacr. 10/355 Page τὰ Ταντάλου τάλαντα τανταλίζεται.

³⁴ For the standard sense of the word, cf. Xenophanes B3 ἀβροσύνας δὲ μαθόντες ἀνωφελέας παρὰ Λυδῶν; W. J. Verdenius, ‘ABPOΣ’, *Mnemosyne* 15 (1962), 392–3.

³⁵ There is a textual uncertainty, but it is reasonably clear that ἀβροσύνη of ‘gait’ is only one aspect of the point; Men. is also a resplendent figure in terms of ‘finery’ and ‘luxuriant hair’

that Prodikos exhibits as he lies late in bed, luxuriating in sheepskins. Though not from Asia, Prodikos was an Ionian Greek, and it is by no means unlikely that he was the most notoriously ἄβρὸς of all the sophists in his way of life. The sentence of Philostratos

χρημάτων τε γὰρ ἥττων ἐτύγχανε καὶ ἡδοναῖς ἐδεδώκει,

which could have been written by a mythographer about Tantalos, was in fact written about Prodikos.

(iii) Despite his wealth, Tantalos was also the archetypal 'parasite' (Nikolaos Com. fr. 1 Edm.) on the strength of his having shared the gods' table (*Orestes* 8–9). According to the pejorative terms familiar in Old Comedy, an 'arch-sophist' was *ipso facto* an 'arch-parasite' – an ἀργὸς πολίτης, fed at the expense of others (*Clouds* 331 ff., etc.).³⁶ On that score, the most 'Tantalos-like' of the sophists was Anaxagoras, as the table-companion of 'Olympian Zeus' (Perikles) and 'Hera' (Aspasia);³⁷ a possible connection of thought of which we shall have more to say in a moment.

(iv) Tantalos was also a paradigm of 'hubristic audacity'.³⁸ Canonically, he had been punished for the disgusting offence of feasting the gods on the flesh of his son Pelops (cf. Euripides, *IT* 387 ff.). But Pindar had substituted a more 'Promethean' type of hubris (the giving to mortals of stolen nectar and ambrosia);³⁹ and in the *Orestes* Tantalos is no longer punished for god-defying *deeds*, but solely for his 'licentious tongue':

ὁ γὰρ μακάριος – κοῦκ ὀνειδίζω τύχας –
Διὸς πεφυκὼς ὡς λέγουσι Τάνταλος
κορυφῆς ὑπερέλλοντα δειμαίνων πέτρον
ἀέρι ποτᾶται· καὶ τίνει ταύτην δίκην,
ὡς μὲν λέγουσιν, ὅτι θεοῖς ἀνθρωπος ὦν
κοινῆς τραπέζης ἀξίωμ' ἔχων ἴσον
ἀκόλαστον ἔχε γλώσσαν, αἰςίζιτην νόσον.

(E. Or. 4–10)

Tantalos the 'pantotolmos' has now become paradigmatic of *verbal* 'hubris against the gods', necessarily of a supremely shocking kind. The context is tragic (even if ironical in tone) and the αἰςίζιτη νόσος of the arch-sinner cannot have been mere impertinence. This new development must have a topical explanation, and Oddone Longo rightly looks to the ferment aroused by sophisticated ἀκέβεια (comparing *Clouds* 375 ὦ πάντα τὸ τολμῶν to the 'blaspheming' Sokrates; note also the topically-charged word ἀκόλαστος, cf. *Clouds* 1348, *Lysistrata* 398, *Birds* 1227, etc.).⁴⁰ The archetypal god-defiers of mythology were readily associable, either for praise or blame, with the revolutionary new ideas of 5th-century philosophy: cf. the 'enlightened' Protagorean teaching of the god-defier in the *Prometheus Vinctus*, and the more ironical dictum that 'reason is like Prometheus to mankind'.⁴¹ Sisypheos, already the archetypal

(1532); cf. the 'Lydian' Dionysos with his ἄβρὸς hair in *Ba.* (493, etc.) and the juxtaposition of ἄβρότης and τρυφάν at *Ba.* 968–9.

³⁶ cf. Ehrenberg, *The People of Aristophanes*, p. 291.

³⁷ For these famous mythological sobriquets (originating in Comedy), cf. Ar. *Ach.* 530, etc., and Plut. *Pericles* 24.

³⁸ cf. Himerius, *Ecl.* 3. 11 (Kerényi, *Heroes*, p. 58); the τλα-root (which may underlie Tantalos' name) alludes to both 'daring' and 'enduring'.

³⁹ *Ol.* 1. 52, 59 ff.; for Pindar's motive, cf. A. Köhnken, *CQ* n.s. 24 (1974), 199, and T. C. W. Stinton, *PCPS* 202 (1976), 68.

⁴⁰ O. Longo, 'Proposte di lettura per l'Oreste di Euripide', *Maia* 27 (1975), 265–87 (see esp. p. 280 n. 58). He is the first commentator, I think, to have seen that this Tantalos is 'emblematic' of sophistic 'tolma'.

⁴¹ Platon Com. fr. 136 (from *The Sophists*).

'sophistical trickster' (*Acharnians* 391), was made the mouthpiece of topically outrageous atheism ('gods were invented by human legislators to prevent men from breaking the laws') in a celebrated fragment of a play variously attributed to Kritias or Euripides.⁴² Euripides' *Ixion* was understood in antiquity as including a cryptic allusion to the recent death by drowning of Protagoras.⁴³ The 'blasphemy' paradigm implicit in *Orestes* 10 must (because of its very implicitness) have been a familiar feature of the Tantalos-myth (or of *μῦθος* about Tantalos) to Euripides' audience in 408 B.C.⁴⁴

We can, I think, go further. Hellenistic sources attest a tradition that Tantalos had been, not merely a vague 'blasphemer', but a *φυσιολόγος* who had anticipated the heresy of Anaxagoras in respect of the sun, and it was for that reason that Zeus punished him by suspending the terrifying rock above his head.⁴⁵ That has usually been regarded merely as a late (Hellenistic) rationalising explanation of the myth as it appears in the lyric poets (to whom, of course, 5th-century *μετεωρολογία* would have been unfamiliar); but the 'pseudo-myth' is not unlikely to have arisen already in the 5th century.⁴⁶ In the *Orestes*, Tantalos is not merely a *μακάριος* and parasitical blasphemer, but a 'flier in air' (*Or.* 7) associated with a *cosmologised*, *quasi-solar* rock (*Or.* 6, 982–4). No one has satisfactorily explained the apparently uncanonical, yet allusively treated, 'airborne' position of the arch-sinner.⁴⁷ But is one not reminded of the 'aerobatic' solar blasphemy of the 'meteorosophists' so memorably satirised in the *Clouds* and recalled by Sokrates at his trial? The new formulation of the myth associates Tantalos with the topically notorious 'supremely audacious verbal hubris' purveyed in the real world by the *ἀκόλαστος γλῶσσα* (= *ἄδολεσχία*) of men like Prodikos.

Clearly there is more than enough here to make possible an explanation of Prodikos' sobriquet without recourse to the inappropriate *ταλάντατος* word-play. On the basis of the above paradigmatic features I offer the following hypothesis as to how Plato intended the Athenian reader of the *Protagoras* to understand the 'Tantalos'

⁴² See now A. Dihle, 'Das Satyrspiel "Sisyphos"', *Hermes* 105 (1977), 28–42.

⁴³ Philochoros *ap.* Diog. Laert. 9. 55; cf. T. B. L. Webster, *The Tragedies of Euripides* (1967), p. 160 n. 2.

⁴⁴ The '*garrula lingua*' became canonical in later treatments of the myth, variously explained or left unexplained: 'betrayal of divine secrets' (Ov. *A.* 2. 606, D. S. 4. 74. 2); 'a too audacious claim to parity of life with the gods' (Ath. 281 b = *Nόστροι* fr. 10 Allen); cf. also *AP* 16. 89 and another late-Hellenistic poem (Barns and Lloyd-Jones, *SIFC* 35 (1963), 205 ff.), Ov. *Am.* 2. 2. 44, *Met.* 6. 213. All these are likely to have been influenced by the new turn given to literary treatment of the Tantalos-myth in the Euripidean *locus classicus*.

⁴⁵ Sch. Pi. *Ol.* 1. 57; cf. Diog. Laert. 2. 8, Eust. *Comm. Od.* 1700. 60.

⁴⁶ The Pindar scholiast (see Diels/Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* II. 11) cites E. *Or.* 4–7 and 982 ff. in support. It *might* be that the myth reported by him was an inference from these passages; but it is odd (if so) that there is no mention of it in the voluminous scholia on *Orestes*.

⁴⁷ As to the 'cosmologised rock', di Benedetto (*Euripidis Orestes* (1965), p. 7) quite reasonably envisages 'una interpretazione razionalistica del mito che risaliva probabilmente all' ambiente anassagoreo' (one might think, e.g., of Metrodoros of Lampsakos; cf. N. J. Richardson, *PCPS* 202 (1976), 405). But such an explanation does not account for the implicitly *hostile* view of the 'blasphemer' and his *αἰσχίστη νόκος*; nor would allusive treatment of an *esoteric* theory have been intelligible to more than a small fraction of the audience. As to the 'flying in air', Kerényi (60–1) associates that with a supposedly very ancient 'cosmic' aspect of Tantalos, and cites Nonnus, *D.* 18. 32 and 35. 295 (*Τάνταλον ἡεροφοίτην*); but it is a safe assumption that Nonnus' epithet (proper to the Erinyes) was simply suggested by Eur.'s phrasing (*Orestes* was a very well-known play). Vincent J. Rosivach (*Maia* 29–30 (1977–8), 77–9) at least recognises the need for an explanation, but his conjecture *ἀεὶ πτοεῖται* is unconvincing; and his argument that 'the rock... should be stationary above Tantalos' head' is vitiated by his total neglect of lines 982–4 (it is *because* the rock *ὑπερέτλlei* and *διενέυει* like the sun that T. now *has* to be *μετέωρος* and in motion, in order to preserve the 'overhead' picture).

allusion, following the first reference to the *Nekyia* (τὸν δὲ μέτ' εἰσενόησα) and to φύσις and τὰ μετέωρα in the account of Hippias:

'And I saw also the *arch-blasphemer* himself, displaying his characteristically Tantalid ἀβροσύνη.' All the details of the *tableau* then fall into place, and we can see why Plato chose to locate Prodikos in a treasure-chamber (ταμείον) converted into a guest-room by his host; exactly the right milieu for the 'money-loving parasite', given that the ἀβροσύνη was to be exemplified by 'still lying in bed wrapped up in many sheepskins'. Note that a veil of irony is drawn over the (implicitly 'shocking') things that 'Tantalos' was loudly declaiming in his 'godlike wisdom'. Similarly in *Orestes* 10 we are told only that Tantalos ἀκόλαστον ἔσχε γλώσσαν, and we are left to guess what he actually *said* that was so outrageous.

Needless to say, several imponderables remain. The chances are that when Plato wrote the *Protagoras* there was a pre-existing connection between Prodikos and Tantalos in Athenian 'myth' (μῦθος). But we have no way of knowing exactly when and how the connection was first made. It would be most unsafe to assume that Prodikos was already 'Tantalos' in the 430s.⁴⁸ At the same time the concept of Tantalos as a blaspheming cosmologist (with 'solar' connections) could go back quite a long way: μῦθος connecting him with the 'Anaxagorean' heresy could have originated in the time of Anaxagoras himself, e.g. if Anaxagoras had been satirised as 'Tantalos' in some Comedy, alongside his 'Olympian' host, or in some forensic speech; the sobriquet will then have attached itself to Prodikos (in other ways a suitable recipient, as we have seen) by a kind of inheritance, when *he* became the pre-eminent 'cosmological blasphemer' in Athenian eyes. On the other hand there is no mention of Tantalos in the *Clouds*, such as one might have expected if he was already the mythological archetype of the kind of blasphemy being satirised. So it seems likeliest that the new μῦθος originated in the decade or so between *Clouds* and *Orestes*;⁴⁹ perhaps in one of these three ways: (a) cosmological blasphemy was put into the mouth of Tantalos in a serious play (cf. the *Sisyphos* fragment); (b) contemporary blasphemers, with a particular focus on Prodikos, were compared with Tantalos in some comedy (the 'flying in air' and the 'suspended rock' could have been handled effectively by the *mechane*); (c) Prodikos was compared with Tantalos in a forensic speech.

As to the *Orestes*, the implications of the present interpretation of the Tantalos-paradigm with which the play unusually opens (following a complex *sententia*) are too far-reaching to be pursued here. Suffice it to say that if, in one way or another, the allusive 'myth-formulation' of the 'emblematic' progenitor was intended – whether wryly or whimsically – to put the audience in mind of 'corrupting babblers like Prodikos', such a topicality would be in line with others in the play; e.g. there are 'Theramenean' features in the treatment of Menelaos and Talthybios as 'political trimmers', echoes of recent trials of oligarchic *hetairoi* (giving a new twist to the characterisation of Orestes and Pylades) and a pejorative allusion to 'demagogues' like Kleophon. As I hope to show in my forthcoming edition, the *Orestes* is at once Euripides' most topical play and a *tour de force* of ingenious *mythopoiia*, presented shortly before he himself left Athens, never to return.

Eton College

C. W. WILLINK

⁴⁸ cf. p. 29 with n. 28. On the assumption that the sobriquet is not Plato's invention, Prodikos is as likely to have acquired it in the decade 420–10 B.C. as in the 430s.

⁴⁹ The relevant date here is of course that of the revised *Clouds* (the surviving version, apparently never performed), assignable to 420–17 B.C. (Dover, pp. lxxx ff.).