CHAPTER FIVE

PRODICUS, ‘METEOROSOPHISTS’ AND THE ‘TANTALUS’ PARADIGM

Three famous sophists are referred to together in the *Apology of Socrates* as still practising their enviably lucrative profession in 399 BC (not, by implication, in Athens): Gorgias of Leontini, Prodicus of Ceos and Hippias of Elis. The last of these was the least well known to the Athenian *demos*, having practised mainly in Dorian cities. 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)—to justify his inclusion as the third of this ‘triad’; cf. the triad Protagoras—Hippias—Prodicus 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 ahead of him), 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. Prodicus and Hippias were probably in their sixties.

For the jurors at Socrates’ trial, Prodicus 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. 506 KA, from the *Tagenistai*), show clearly his unique eminence, or notoriety:

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1 *CQ* 33 (1983), 25–33. [Cf. my comm. on *Or.* 4–10.] 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.


5 Guthrie, 269 ff.


7 Guthrie, 274, 280 n. 3 (against the view of M. Untersteiner that Hippias was born c. 443 BC).
on the one hand as the ‘cosmological expert’ (‘Listen to us’, the Bird-Chorus exhort humanity in their prospectus, ‘and henceforth say goodbye to Prodicus’); on the other—admittedly in an unknown context—as the exemplary ‘corrupting babbler’ (‘This fellow has been corrupted either by some book or by Prodicus or some (other) ἄδολεχχης’).  

No sophist had enjoyed a more lucrative practice in Athens during the Peloponnesian War. On official missions from Ceos 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. His ‘50-drachma’ lecture-courses, available only to the wealthy, were ironically ‘admired’ by Socrates and were presumably a byword among the ἄ polloi. 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). Like Protagoras before him, Prodicus included ‘political arete’ (with an emphasis on debating skills) as a major component in a comprehensive (partly ‘cosmological’) prospectus. According to Aeschines of Sphettus, he had been the ‘teacher’ of the moderate oligarch Theramenes; and, certainly, there was a strong oligarchic element in the elitist circles in which Prodicus 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 Prodicus to admire, but even the laudatory references (expressions...

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8 τούτων τῶν ἄνδρ’ ἦ βιβλίον διέφθορεν | ἦ Πρόδικος ἦ τῶν ἄδολεχχων εἰς γέ τις (fr. 506 KA). τῶν ἄδολεχχων τις means ‘some prater, babbler’ (a standard use of τις with the gen. pl.); εἰς γέ emphasizes ‘some’ (sc. ‘if not Prodicus’). See further on p. 86 with n. 25.

9 Pl. Hipp. maj. 282c: ... πολλάκις μὲν καὶ ἄλλοτε δημοσίαι ἀφίκετο, ἀταρ τὰ τελευταῖα ἐναγχοροῦν δημοσίαι ἐκ Κέω λέγον τ’ ἐν τῇ βουλῇ πάνυ γνωκόμισεν καὶ ἰδίαι ἐπιδείξεις ποιοῦμενος καὶ τοῖς νέοις ευνόμων χρήματα ἔλαβεν θεαμαστὰ όοια.


11 Philostr. Vit. sophist. 12; cf. Xen. Sympos. 4. 62 (Socrates refers ironically to Prodicus as ἄρεται σοφιστέων δεόμενόν).  

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 Prodicean moral allegory (of whose profundity opinions have differed—see Guthrie, 277–8).