

Vincent Azoulay, *Pericles of Athens*. J. Lloyd, trans. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014. Pp. xiv + 291. ISBN 978-0-691-15459-6. (hardback).

In his new book on Pericles, Azoulay aims to focus on the “complex interaction between the crowd and its leaders,” on “the productive tension that developed between the *strategos* and the Athenian community” in order to “plumb [...] the true historical depths of both Pericles and the city” (4). After a brief survey of the ancient sources on Pericles, Azoulay admits that “to produce a straightforward biography of Pericles involves guesswork or even an illusion” (13). Despite this, Azoulay does not throw up his hands in despair. Rather, he notes that all the ancient sources on Pericles “in their own ways, ponder the relations established between Pericles the individual and the community in which he lived.” They ask, was Pericles an “all-powerful figure” or a “ventriloquist” for the people. Azoulay makes this question “the guiding thread” for his inquiry (13). But Azoulay does not explain here what connection his inquiry will have to the historical truth about Pericles himself. Sources that focus on the relations between Pericles and his community may tell us about the presuppositions and concerns of the public at different points in history, but without some other corroborating evidence, they cannot tell us what the actual Pericles did or thought. Throughout the text, Azoulay does not distinguish as clearly as one might wish between describing the ancient construction of Pericles and defining the historical man.

The text is divided into two main parts. The first focuses on the historical Pericles, or at least the construction of Pericles in ancient authors. Chapters 1–3 focus on the bases of Pericles’ power in his family connections, military prowess, and oratorical ability. Chapters 4–8 examine Pericles’ relation to Athenian imperialism, to economics (both public and private), to his “circle,” to *eros*, and to the city gods. Chapter 9 investigates the presentation of the death of Pericles as a “turning point in the history of Athens” (126) while Chapter 10 returns to the initial question: “was Pericles an all-powerful figure or an evanescent one?” In the second part, in chapters 11 and 12, Azoulay surveys the reception of Pericles.

There is much that is interesting here. Azoulay demonstrates, for example, that due to the popularity of Plutarch over Thucydides, Pericles was not much admired in Europe, spending “a long spell in purgatory (15th–18th centuries)” (157). In the earlier section, too, Azoulay uses the sources and rumors about Pericles to paint a fascinating picture of the 5th century Athenian response to politicians (or, at least, of some later writers’ ideas about the 5th century Athenian response to politicians). But it is unclear what this picture has to do with the historical Pericles.

Azoulay tends to blur the distinction between the two by his style of writing, in which he often seems to channel a given construction of Pericles in his own voice. For example, in the chapter on Pericles and *eros*, Azoulay quotes the Socrates of Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* for the idea that Perikles “knew many [spells] and put them on the city . . . and so made it love him.” But then Azoulay remarks that “Xenophon’s Socrates was not alone in drawing attention to the erotic dimension of Pericles’ authority” (97). That

“the” in “the erotic dimension of Pericles’ authority” makes it sound as if an erotic dimension existed in fact rather than only in the constructions of writers. So too, when Azoulay goes on to remark that “this erotic seduction [of the people] had lasting effects. It left its imprint on the souls of the Athenians to the point of arousing a nostalgic regret when Pericles was forced to step down from the political stage” (98) it is unclear whether he means that this actually happened, or just that those creating a myth of Pericles included such a nostalgic regret in their fictional portrait. Azoulay clarifies this in the next sentence, when he writes “According to Plutarch, the city ‘missed him [*epotheses d’ekeinon*]’” (98). And presumably Azoulay expects the reader to understand that the sentences that sound like declarative statements of historical fact should really be understood to be parrotting the ancient construction, but the style is confusing.

The fuzzy distinction (or lack of distinction) the text makes between truth and portrait sometimes leads Azoulay to be careless with source criticism. For example, Azoulay tells an anecdote from Plutarch designed to show that Perikles believed that “a leader must demonstrate his self-control in all circumstances” (98). He does not critique the anecdote or discuss explicitly whether he believes the events it describes actually occurred, but his language suggests he accepts it because he sets up the anecdote with the remark that “it seems that Pericles was all the more attractive because, whatever the circumstances, he maintained a solemn distance and great self-control” (98). This sentence sounds like it means to indicate what the historical Perikles really seems to have been like. If, instead, it means something like “it seems that the ancient authors found a combination of sexual allure and sexual restraint attractive because they combined both in the portrait they painted of Pericles,” it is very unclear. Azoulay goes on to claim that “this show of self-control had another purpose: by demonstrating his self-control, the *strategos* sought above all not to appear as a tyrant whose sexuality was uncheckable” (98). I find it hard to read this sentence as a mere description of the ancient construction of Perikles, since it speaks of the “purpose” of “this” show of self-control and what the *strategos* “sought” with it. It makes it sound as if Azoulay believes that Perikles really was deliberately self-controlled in order to avoid charges of tyrannical excess. But if that is the case, Azoulay has not proven his claim because the only evidence he provides for “this show of self-control” is an anecdote from Plutarch, the historicity of which he does not discuss. If, instead, what Azoulay means to convey with this sentence is “ancient authors favorable to Perikles included in their construction demonstrations of his sexual self-control for the purpose of freeing their hero from charges of tyrannical excess,” he has again been very unclear.

Equally troubling is Azoulay’s treatment of the sources regarding relations between Pericles and his son Xanthippus. In several places, Azoulay reports the claim of Stesimbrotus of Thasos (known to us through Plutarch *Pericles* 36.3) that Pericles’ son Xanthippus said that Pericles had slept with his (Xanthippus’) wife (87, 100, 132, 152). Azoulay says it is “hard to credit” the rumor (87), admits that most commentators have “dismissed such anecdotes out of hand” (100), and himself suggests they were “groundless” (151). He reports them, nevertheless, because “they certainly were not

harmless. They forged collective beliefs that could not simply be swept aside by their victims," (151) and they "tell us a lot about popular expectations and the moral behavior expected of members of the elite" (100). Azoulay, that is, seems not to believe the content of the rumor (that Pericles slept with his daughter-in-law) but does seem to accept without question that Xanthippus actually told the story. Indeed, Azoulay writes that the rumors about Pericles "would sometimes emerge in private [places]. According to Plutarch, Pericles was the target of slander started by members of his own family, who were indignant at his intransigent attitude where financial matters were concerned" (151). "It seems," he goes on, "that, later, Pericles' elder son even increased his attacks to the point of starting a rumor" about the incest (151).

Azoulay thus seems to accept not only the discord between Pericles and his son, but the reason for it (that Xanthippus was "indignant" at Pericles' attitude to money and the amount of his allowance). This anecdote then becomes part of the basis of Azoulay's claim that Pericles' attitude to money "smacked of stinginess to the point of creating serious tensions within his own family. His children bitterly resented the mediocre lifestyle that he imposed on the entire household" (71). We are told elsewhere that "his relations with his legitimate heirs, particularly his elder son, Xanthippus, were severely fraught." For this Azoulay cites only the incest anecdote, which he will not "credit," but goes on to claim that "however, the fact remains that Pericles refused to advantage his own children . . . in all probability not so much out of stinginess as in order not to affront the people" (87). But Azoulay has given us no evidence for this alleged fact about Pericles' approach to his private economy apart from the anecdote from Stesimbrotus that indeed we should not credit.

In fact, we should distrust all stories about Pericle's bad relations with his sons because it is clear, as even Azoulay remarks, that Socratic authors "in order to emphasize [Pericles'] fundamental inability to educate anyone at all, . . . concentrated their critiques on the *strategos'* difficult relationship with his own children." (132). Thus the Socratic authors (and others) had every reason to make up stories that showed discord between Pericles and his sons. We should not, therefore, believe either that Pericles slept with his daughter-in-law, or that Xanthippus ever said that he did so, or that Xanthippus was irritated at a small allowance, or that Pericles gave him a small allowance, or, it would seem, unless there is other good evidence for it, that we have any idea what Pericles' private economy was like. Azoulay, in contrast, right after noting the motive the Socratic authors had to make up stories about familial discord, writes that "it must be said that [Pericles'] children, in particular his elder son, Xanthippus, had not hesitated to criticize their father or even, according to Stesimbrotus of Thasos, to circulate the most appalling rumors about him. The Socratics thus had a fine time opposing the discord (*stasis*) that reigned in the *strategos'* family to the necessary unity that was believed to prevail in the city" (132). Perhaps Azoulay is just channeling again, but it certainly seems as if he accepts that the discord (and everything else except, perhaps, the incest) is real. But it is all illusion and not to be believed. So although this book provides an interesting picture of the concerns about, and reactions to, Pericles of a

number of different groups through the ages, it has little to say about the historical figure himself. That it often appears to do so, however, has the danger of leading uncareful readers astray.

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