

H-France Review Vol. 8 (August 2008), No. 99

Nicole Hochner. *Louis XII: les dérèglements de l'image royale*. Paris: Champ Vallon, 2007. 312 pp. illustrations. € 26 E.U. ISBN 978-2876734531.

Review by Frederic Baumgartner, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

In 1985 Bernard Chevalier commented that the reign of Louis XII was “this no man’s land where neither medievalists nor modernists dare to penetrate.” In the two decades since, his remark has become considerably less accurate with the publication of Bernard Quilliet’s biography of Louis in 1986, my own in 1994, Georges Bordonove’s in 2000, Didier Le Fur’s in 2001, and now Nicole Hochner’s study of royal imagery during his reign. Hochner’s book is an outgrowth of her dissertation completed at the University of Cambridge in 1998, and she is currently on the faculty of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.^[1]

The author proposes that royal imagery is worthy of study because it is what makes the state visible to its people, and she approvingly cites Michael Walzer’s dictum: “The state is invisible, it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived.”^[2] She argues that Louis XII’s reign is crucial for understanding the iconography of the French absolute monarchy of the seventeenth century, because during it two different approaches to royal imagery—the ancient as mediated by Renaissance humanism and the medieval—come into conflict. The former contained the symbolism and images of pagan mythology supporting royal absolutism; the latter, of Christianity and chivalry supporting the medieval tradition of constitutionalism. Consequently the royal imagery of Louis’ reign consists of opposing tendencies and confusion; it is “a period of groping, a search for identity” (p. 31). Her focus is principally on the visual imagery of the era, but literary works and the court histories and chronicles written during Louis’ reign are also given extensive attention.

A book devoted to the royal imagery of Louis XII’s reign, Hochner avows, is necessary not only because of the vast range of works that it encompassed but also because of her objection to the use of the term “propaganda” as applied to those works. She states that she prefers the term *art d’incantatoire* as used by E. H. Gombrich in reference to the image fabricated for Lorenzo the Magnificent by artists and writers.^[3] The fashioning of the royal image was in the hands of the artist, poet, and intellectual who produced their works largely to win royal patronage, although—to be sure—the king or others of his court commissioned some of them.

Hochner first turns her attention to the years of Louis XII’s life during the years between the death of Louis XI in 1483 and his succession to the throne in 1498, when he was the duke of Orléans and first prince of blood as well as a rebel and a royal prisoner for three years. The first surviving piece of his coat of arms, a round seal from 1486, shows a galloping rider with drawn sword bearing the coat of arms of France and Milan, a reference to the house of Orléans’ claim to that duchy through Louis’ grandmother, Valentina Visconti. Mounted on the rear of the horse is a porcupine, that truly odd insignia of the Orléans family. It was first used by Louis’ grandfather, the victim of the infamous assassination in 1407, to symbolize the power of his house to defend itself, “from near and from afar,” referring to the porcupine’s ability to use its quills at close range and allegedly to throw them at a distance. Hochner argues that Louis used the porcupine, an attribute of Mars, to indicate his determination to win the Milanais from Ludovico Sforza, as demonstrated by the use of porcupines on

red and white banners that also contain the coat of arms of Milan. Once Louis became king in 1498 upon the unexpected death of Charles VIII, he continued to use the porcupine as his badge. The most elaborate example occurred during his first entry into Paris in July 1498 when the Parisians built a giant mechanical porcupine that moved its eyes and quills. Almost to the end of his reign the animal was used largely in connection with the coat of arms of Milan, serving clearly as a symbol of his determination to recover his grandmother's legacy.

Just prior to his first entry into Paris, Louis XII had been consecrated king at Reims. Hochner shows that the iconography for that event emphasized his standing as *Roi très-Chrétien* with its highly traditional religious imagery; he was the new David chosen and anointed by God. The symbolism was intended to dispel any doubts about his right to rule as a former rebel against the crown. A month after his coronation Louis made his entry into Paris, which served as an opportunity for the Parisians to reveal what they expected of their new sovereign. The author analyzes in detail the extensive symbolism found in the twelve stations where the royal party stopped to take in the sights. She concludes that they can be summed up in three themes: the new king as crusader against the infidel, as source of peace, justice, and good government in his realm, and as conqueror of Italy.

In her next chapter Hochner examines the image of Louis XII as *Le Roi Chevalier*. A French king of that era was expected to provide war for his nobles to win *gloire* and take plunder. It was less important that he personally be present with his army, although it was generally agreed that troops fought better when the king was with them. Louis' record in war was mixed, but that did not prevent his publicists from depicting him as a heroic knight and mighty conqueror. The taking of Genoa in 1507 was especially highly regarded and merited much comment because "Genoa the Proud" had long prided itself on having never been occupied by foreign troops. The other event that elicited great pride was Louis' victory over Venice at Agnadel in 1509. Hochner notes the large number of authors who celebrated that victory and artists who depicted the victorious king in the midst of the battle with his men.

The images in much of that literature and art were highly traditional, but in her next chapter the author turns to the use of themes and images from antiquity—not that the use of them was entirely new to Louis' reign, but it was more frequent and systematic than in earlier reigns. Hochner deems the purpose of their use as the presentation of Louis as the new Caesar, the restorer of Roman grandeur. One of the devices intended to affirm this was his use of the imperial crown, with its closed arch over the top of the head, instead of the traditional open crown of the French monarchy. The author finds that its use was closely connected to Louis' aspirations in Italy, as were other imperial symbols, the globe and the imperial eagle. Depictions of Louis in Roman military dress, the use of ancient symbols in his royal entrances, especially into Italian cities, and numerous poems and panegyrics support her position that there was a neo-classical revival centered around the king. Yet she is aware that there was a conflict between those of Louis' publicists who preferred the traditional medieval symbols and those who used the neo-classical. It was in large part a conflict over the nature of royal authority—between an absolutist point of view based on imperial Rome and the limited monarchy of the Middle Ages. Guillaume Budé, faithful to Ciceronian ideas, and Claude de Seyssel, who preferred the traditional Charlemagne and Louis IX, well represent the two points of view.

The author follows with a chapter on the images of the king as "Defender of the Faith."

The French king was *le roi très-Chrétien*; God has chosen and anointed him, endowing him with the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit. As the model of piety, Louis XII recalled St. Louis, the quintessential Catholic king. Like his saintly predecessor, Louis XII too must become a crusader. Much to the surprise of almost everyone in Europe, however, it was against the papacy rather than the Turk that Louis found himself involved in a bitter conflict. Julius II's fervent desire to oust the "Barbarians" from his homeland led to a war that was fought both with armies and pamphlets. That conflict challenged Louis' image as the Most Christian King, and several significant figures among French writers of the early Renaissance—Jean Marot, Jacques Lemaire de Belges, Jean d'Auton, Pierrre Gringore—set to work to

defend their king from charges of schism and worse. In order to achieve their goal, they had to present him as the exemplary Christian king, *justus et pius*.

Louis XII had little reason to worry that papal anathemas would promote rebellion in his realm, Hochner argues, because he had received the highest affirmation of the love of his people in 1506, when the Estates General proclaimed him "Father of the People." The primary attribute the title involved was the giving of justice. The author examines the many tableaus and descriptions depicting Louis as the just judge. Another necessary virtue for the "Father of the People" was clemency. Louis was praised for his clemency in the case of the rebellious city of Genoa: "The king to whom we are subject refrains from using his stinger." The medieval kingdom was often compared to a bee hive, which was a traditional metaphor for social stability and tranquility, and the head of the hive was thought to be male, hence the image of *le roi abeille*. Hochner uses it to lead into a discussion of the proper nature of royal authority in France of Louis' time. She argues that the issue of whether the French monarchy of that era was absolutist or constitutional that so exercised historians of several decades ago would not have made sense to Louis' publicists. For writers such as Seyssel and Gringore, the choice lies between the king who uses his authority to sow disorder and ruin in his realm and the one who allows his power to be bridled for the common good—a king who loves his people. Hochner shows at length how Louis XII was presented as the model of the latter (while Louis XI was seen as the former) and thus was truly worthy of his title *Père du Peuple*. Yet the title was originally used for Caesar Augustus and had powerful overtones of imperial Rome. It is, consequently, a "fundamentally hybrid composition, characteristic of Louis XII" (p. 215).

Although that last statement might have served well as the conclusion to this book, Hochner goes on to devote two final chapters to the king in his council and to the queen. For the former she relies mostly on literary evidence to assess the images of Louis' principal advisers, especially Cardinal Georges d'Amboise and Constable Pierre de Gié. While the proper image of the king's councilors was that of the figure of Good Council, criticism of them was a means of complaining about royal decision-making without directly attacking the king. The many *sotties* written during Louis' reign frequently targeted his major advisors in their satire, although the king himself did not escape entirely. Louis' dependence on d'Amboise, Gié, and other major figures at the court was generally seen as proper, however, as it showed that he was eager to consult—a necessary virtue for a good king who sought what was for the common good.

Likewise the role of the queen, "this other king," was that of mediator between the king and his people. She would contribute to the idyllic relationship between king and people by encouraging peace and love. Often used was the image of the kingdom as a garden, in which the king plants and the queen waters, so that the realm will bear good fruit. For most of Louis' reign Anne of Brittany was his queen. As the autonomous duchess of Brittany she had her own revenues to patronize artists and writers, a point that Hochner does not make. When Louis was away in Italy several times, Anne was presented as capable of governing in his absence. The other image frequently used for her was that of conjugal love; the love between the king and the queen is the same as that between the king and his people.

Hochner concludes that there was a profound uncertainty about how royal power should be represented in the later years of Louis' reign, oscillating between the traditional image of *le roi très Chrétien* and the classical image of the absolute emperor. This is the sense in which she uses the word "disordered" in the book's title. Yet I am not convinced that the conflict and competition between the two sets of images is as evident as her case proposes, nor is it unique to Louis' reign. Certainly there was such discordance present then, but it would be true for much of the rest of the sixteenth century. Francis I's reign had a significant element, even if it is seen as the era of the victory of the classical imagery, and Henry II's at mid-century still demonstrated it to an extent.

This is a highly erudite book with a very impressive range of sources. The author was able to go to St.

Petersburg to use the large collection of French materials that a wealthy Russian collector carried off there prior to World War I. The work is well provided with illustrations, albeit in black and white. More importantly Hochner demonstrates as patently false, at least for Louis XII's reign, the statement made by André Chastel in 1981 about the "surprising void" in royal patronage of art and culture in the fifty years prior to 1515.^[4]

NOTES

[1] Bernard Quilliet, *Louis XII, Père du peuple* (Paris: Fayard, 1986); Frederick J. Baumgartner, *Louis XII* (Stroud, UK: Sutton, 1994); Georges Bordonove, *Les Rois qui ont fait la France: Louis XII* (Broché, 2000); Didier Didier Le Fur, *Louis XII: Un autre César* (Paris: Perrin, 2001).

[2] Michael Walzer, "On the role of Symbolism in Political Thought, *Political Science Quarterly* 82 (1967): 194.

[3] E. H. Grombach, "Renaissance and Golden Age," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 24 (1961): 307.

[4] André Chastel, "French Renaissance Art in European Context," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 12 (1981): 93-94.

Frederic J. Baumgartner
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
treeman@vt.edu

Copyright © 2008 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172