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, Pierre 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


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