CHAPTER THREE

THE VALOIS TRINITY TAKES POWER:
NEW REGIME AND CHURCH REFORM, 1515–1521

Ung seul cueur en troys corps aujour’dhuy voy en France,
Régnant en doux accords sans quelque différence,
D’amour tant enlacez qu’il semble que Nature,
Les formant, ayt chaisez dissension, murmure,
Pour nourrir sans discords amoureuse alliance.

Ung Pin, bien m’en records, en Savoye eut croissance,
Si très beau que dès lors le Lys pour sa plaisance
Fleurons y a entrez et mys par géniture
Ung seul cueur en troys corps.

L’un est entre les fors nommé pour sa puissance,
François, franc aux effors, des Françoys la fiancée.
Sa seur bien connoissez, duchesse nette et pure,
Bonne trop plus que assez. O noble norriture!
Ung seul cueur en troys corps.

—Jean Marot

The Royal Trinity

Early in Francis I’s reign, the term “the Royal Trinity” was coined to celebrate the special relationship between the king, his mother, Louise of Savoy, and his sister Marguerite, duchess of Alençon. François Du Moulin de Rochefort, the king’s tutor, had invented it, and poets and artists, such as Jean Marot, quickly adopted it to represent the new royal regime.1 This surprising appropriation of a divine metaphor reflects Francis’s close association of his mother and sister in his rule.

1 Citing Jean Marot’s poem, Anne-Marie Lecoq devotes a rich chapter to the metaphor of the Royal Trinity, which courtiers and the royal threesome itself employed early and frequently. See “L’un des angles du ‘parfait triangle,’” in François Ier imaginaire: Symbolique et politique à l’aube de la Renaissance française (Paris: Macula, 1987), 393–433.

Myra Orth relates that in François Du Moulin’s translation of Psalm 26 (BnF F. fr. 2088), dedicated to Louise and to Francis, he reprises the trinity metaphor employing Marguerite’s name as a synonym for union. Similarly, the anonymous “Livre de prières”
This sharing of power was a natural expression of the tightly-knit family relationship that had developed during the difficult years prior to Francis’s succession. The Valois trinity took form in 1496 when Charles of Angoulême died, leaving his twenty-year-old wife with two young children and significant titular rights but little protection. Although closely guarded by Louis XII, Louise single-mindedly managed the family so that Francis, who was a few fortuitous steps from the throne, would one day become a great lord, and, God willing, king. When Louis XII died on 1 January 1515, the crown passed to Francis. Though he had an indisputable claim to the throne by Salic law, Francis had yet to discover if he could effectively exercise his royal power. Kinship, loyalty, or obligation bound few prelates, high nobles, and royal officials to him. Francis had not even been Louis’ most powerful vassal; Charles of Bourbon had enjoyed this status. Additionally, some taint may have rested on the house of Angoulême, since Francis’s father had participated in The Foolish War (La guerre folle), a rebellion of nobles during Charles VIII’s minority that was quickly crushed. Nor had Francis established a significant reputation as a warrior. Before his coronation, his most notable exploit was to serve as lieutenant general during a failed campaign to retake Spanish Navarre in 1512, when he was scarcely past adolescence.


2 The marriage of Charles and Susanne de Bourbon in 1500 unified a large collection of independent duchies and counties into a compact unit in the center of France. For further details and a map, see Léon and Albert Mirot, Manuel de géographie historique de la France, 2 parts, 2nd ed. (Paris: Picard 1947 & 1950; repr. Paris: Picard, 1980) 221, 229–231; for Charles of Bourbon’s status as Francis I’s most powerful vassal, his illustrious military reputation, his regalian powers in his territories, and the offices granted to him later by Francis I, see Knecht, Renaissance Warrior, 42–43 and 200–206.

3 In fact, Charles d’Angoulême’s marriage to Louise of Savoy was one of the prices he had to pay for his defeat. Charles Terrasse, François Ier: Le roi & le règne, vol. 1 (Paris: Grassset, 1943), 10. Cf. Knecht, Renaissance Warrior, 1–3. Though an older work, Terrasse’s study is valuable since he often provides additional details and more extensive quotations than Knecht does on issues that they treat in common. This merit is undermined, however, by a systematic lack of notes. Knecht’s study is without doubt a much finer work, being broader in scope and more penetrating in insight.

4 Knecht, Renaissance Warrior, 15.