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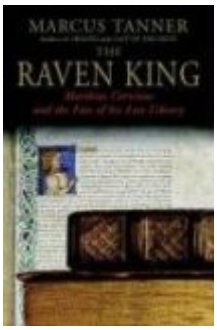

Marcus Tanner. *The Raven King: Matthias Corvinus and the Fate of His Lost Library.* New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009. pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-12034-9.

Reviewed by Phillip Haberkern

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Commissioned by Susan R. Boettcher

At its core, *The Raven King* is a book about books. Although nearly half of the book is comprised of a more conventional biography of the king of Hungary, Matthias Corvinus (r. 1458-90), the heart of Marcus Tanner's new monograph is its account of the production, procurement, display, and dissolution of Corvinus's library over the course of his life and in the aftermath of his death. In the process of describing how the Hungarian king's appetite for manuscripts led to his accumulation of one of the largest libraries in Europe, Tanner also illuminates a number of other important themes in contemporary Renaissance research, including the spread of humanist ideals from Italy to the edges of Europe; the political benefit of relationships between royal houses and humanist authors; and the ways in which objects and their public display could confer cultural and political legitimacy to their possessors. The twin processes of the creation and destruction of Corvinus's library would seem ideal lenses through which to view all of these themes, and at certain places in this book they are. Unfortunately, though, the larger narrative in which Tanner's account of the library's existence is embedded tends to obscure his insights into the dense, international networks of cultural and political exchange that crisscrossed Renaissance Europe. Indeed, Tanner attempts to situate his history of the library within an epic political narrative of late medieval Europe, and the end result is that the broad strokes of the latter prevent the author from maintaining sufficient focus on the fine details that make his portrayal of the former so interesting.

The work is structured as a biography of Matthias Corvinus, and Tanner does well to provide an outline of the Hungarian king's life. As Tanner points out, Corvinus constructed a state that incorporated pieces of present-day Serbia, Croatia, Romania, Austria, Slovakia, Poland, and the Czech Republic, thus creating a central European "superpower" in the fifteenth century. This political and military success was made more remarkable by the fact that the previous king of Hungary had executed Corvinus's brother, and that Corvinus himself was imprisoned for several

years before his surprise coronation in 1458. Tanner documents how Corvinus used political patronage, marriage alliances, reforms to Hungary's system of taxation, and his "quick wit and a talent for dissimulation" (p. 65) in order to establish himself securely on the throne. More interestingly, Tanner highlights the problems of legitimacy that Corvinus faced as a royal parvenu and his consequent employment of humanist authors to shape his public image. Drawing on his family's history as successful fighters against the Ottomans and his own patronage of learning, Corvinus effectively had himself cast as an ideal Platonic philosopher-king who combined the military strength of David with the wisdom of Solomon.

According to Tanner, the main vehicle for this remarkable case of Renaissance self-fashioning was Corvinus's library, a collection that may have contained upwards of 2,500 works by the time of his death. Tanner vividly portrays the processes by which Corvinus and his agents gathered the books for his library, and the sections describing the copying and illumination of manuscripts, book-buying voyages by Corvinus's representatives, and competition for the purchase of existing libraries are the book's best. They capture a culture marked by intellectual ferment, conspicuous consumption, political ambition, and the mercenary intersection of skilled artists and patrons who desired beautiful objects that could communicate their wealth, power, and legitimacy. They also show the development of a pan-European society that was an avid importer of ideas and practices that originated among the Italian humanists and cities. Tanner depicts the Hungarian king as a determined, successful consumer of Renaissance culture and its literary output. He traces the development of Corvinus's library from its origins in the travels and purchases of the Hungarian humanist Janus Pannonius, through the organization of the collection under the librarian Taddeo Ugoleto, to the feverish purchases and orders made by Corvinus in his last years. The book also reports on the library's dissolution after Corvinus's death: the sale of books by his successor, Ladislaus Jagiellon; the theft of many volumes by foreign ambassadors and visitors; the general neglect of the remaining collection and the physical library; and the seizure of the remaining works in the wake of the Ottoman sack of Buda in 1526. The final chapters of the book detail the place of this "lost library" in the imagination of later bibliophiles and the Hungarian people as a whole. For centuries, the appearance of ancient "Corvinas" could cause a stir among European intellectuals, and during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Hungarian scholars sought manuscripts in Istanbul and around Europe as artifacts of Hungary's golden age under Corvinus. Although relatively few of Corvinus's books were ever returned to Hungary, those that were were "enormously significant political as well as cultural symbols" (p. 204); they represented the last remnants of a powerful, autonomous Hungary whose ruler had made the kingdom one of the centers of European culture.

As he acknowledges in the preface, Tanner spent years tracking down extant "Corvinas" and cataloguing the efforts of earlier scholars to reconstruct the contents and size of Matthias Corvinus's library. As such, the sections of the book dealing with the library are meticulously researched and rest on a solid scholarly foundation. The chief problem with the work is that the same cannot be said for the remainder of the book. In his desire to situate Corvinus and his library within their broader cultural contexts, Tanner offers cursory examinations of other kingdoms and courts, and his historical narrative depends entirely on secondary sources, the vast majority in English. As a result, it can seem somewhat limited, or even simplistic. This impression is strengthened by Tanner's tendency towards rendering personal judgments on the figures who populate his account. Primarily, Tanner is remarkably sympathetic to Corvinus; he acknowledges that the book "seems suffused with the message 'vive le roi'" (p. xvii), and the nostalgia that suffuses his

account of Corvinus's court borders on the hagiographic. Tanner does acknowledge Corvinus's failure to construct institutions (notably a university) to preserve the cultural gains made under his patronage. This recognition is superseded, though, by a romantic image of Corvinus that corresponds in many ways to that of the nineteenth-century scholars who pursued the king's raven-stamped manuscripts. The book's valorization of Corvinus is offset, if not balanced, by its condemnation of other figures. The nephew of Corvinus's second wife, Ippolito d'Este, is a particular target of Tanner's, despite the fact that Corvinus himself granted Ippolito the archbishopric of Esztergom at age seven. Bizarrely, Tanner's final words on Ippolito are that he led a "hedonistic existence" and died from a "surfeit of crayfish" (p. 147). Frustratingly, no citation explains this fantastic death, so the reader is left with only a moralizing dismissal.

The sporadic footnotes throughout the text can be frustrating. For instance, a long quotation from a Hungarian parliamentary decree of 1844 has no citation to the original source (p. 193), leaving interested readers at a loss. The book's editor also elects not to use Slavic diacritics, perhaps in an effort not to overwhelm readers with unfamiliar letters and sounds. It is possible that the paucity of the scholarly apparatus, these textual choices, and the broad scope of the book's narrative were aimed at expanding the readership of this book to a popular market; those decisions, however, have consequences. It is true that the story of Corvinus's meteoric rise to, and canny consolidation of, political and cultural influence has been relatively inaccessible to an English-speaking audience up until now. Tanner therefore performs a valuable service in presenting Corvinus to a new audience, but the compromises made in the text in order to achieve this goal also diminish the text's suitability for a scholarly audience and limit its potential use in the classroom.

In short, ***The Raven King*** is a baffling book. On the one hand, it presents a fascinating study of patronage, classical learning, and book production in the fifteenth century. It moves easily from the cities of the Italian peninsula to Corvinus's court in "barbarian" Hungary in order to explore the intellectual, dynastic, and cultural links that bound Renaissance Europe together. It offers a welcome geographical expansion to the cultural history of the Italian Renaissance, as well as an excellent analysis of the production and dissemination of manuscripts in the earliest years of print culture. On the other hand, however, the history of learning and the court culture of Matthias's Buda is uncomfortably framed by a sweeping history of late medieval Europe that never quite decides if it is intended for a popular or scholarly audience. This indecision ultimately leads to a historical narrative that lacks sufficient scholarly grounding and frequently resorts to anecdotal, speculative, or melodramatic interpretations of events. As a result, this book's potential contribution to our greater comprehension of the culture of the Renaissance gets obscured. Much like Corvinus's manuscripts, the complex interactions between political power, cultural borrowing, and intellectual consumption in the fifteenth century described in ***The Raven King*** get lost within the narrative of Hungary's history.

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