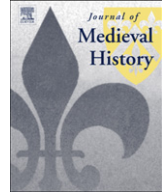




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# Was Thomas Favent a political pamphleteer? Faction and politics in later fourteenth-century London

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### A B S T R A C T

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Thomas Favent's *Historia* has long been recognised as an important source for the turbulent middle years of Richard II's reign, in particular for its praise of the actions of the Lords Appellant in the Merciless Parliament of 1388. But why did Favent write the *Historia* and for whom was it written? In recent years the *Historia* has for the first time been subjected to detailed scrutiny and a case has made for regarding it as a political pamphlet written for a community of reform-minded civil servants eager to celebrate the achievements of parliament. This study offers an alternative explanation. It seeks to place the *Historia* more squarely within the turbulent environment of London's factional politics. Favent's factional affiliations are easily discerned, but his motivations for writing the *Historia* were complex and multi-faceted. A new reading of this text suggests, in fact, that it was written not to perpetuate divisions within London, but to draw a line underneath them. The article highlights the use of textual representation to shape and ultimately control memories of political conflict.

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Perhaps with the exception of the *Modus tenendi parliamentum*, the political tract known as *Historia sive narracio de modo et forma mirabilis parliamenti apud Westmonasterium anno domini millesimo CCCLXXXVI* is probably the most enigmatic of surviving 'unofficial' texts written about events to take place in the late medieval parliament. Unlike the *Modus*, we know who wrote the *Historia*, but this advances our knowledge of the manuscript very little, for the few scraps of evidence that shed light on who Thomas Favent was provide no real clues to establish when he wrote it, who came to read it and, most important of all, what its purpose was. Favent was a clerk, almost certainly a cleric in major

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orders, who was recorded as holding a benefice in the diocese of Salisbury from 1390.<sup>1</sup> Between 1391 and 1395 he was a customs officer in the port of London, assigned to collect the duties on tonnage and poundage. At least in these years we can be confident that Favent was based in London, though we have no knowledge of when he moved there from Shaftesbury (Dorset) where he probably grew up: his father had been mayor of the town in 1355. Other than his appointment as a customs official, there is no other known record of Favent's activities, though we might surmise from his authorship of the *Historia* that he supplemented the income from his benefice by taking on casual clerical work in the capital. He had a brother, Robert, who was returned as member of parliament for Shaftesbury in the parliament of January 1390,<sup>2</sup> and a sister, Cecily, who became abbess of Shaftesbury abbey in 1398. He died in 1404. His text, the *Historia*, first came to attention when May McKisack published an edition in the Camden Society Miscellany of 1926.<sup>3</sup> The original manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley Rolls 9, was obtained by the Bodleian Library from an unknown donor in 1607. Since publication, the *Historia* has been used by historians primarily in a supporting role, to flesh out broader narratives of the reign of Richard II, and to demonstrate the popularity of the Appellants' attack on King Richard in 1388. In 2002 Andrew Galloway usefully published a translation of the text.<sup>4</sup>

Clementine Oliver's recent monograph is the first full-length study of Favent's writing and is a most welcome addition to the literature on Richard II's reign.<sup>5</sup> Her study makes a case for regarding the *Historia* as a particularly important example of a growing culture of political pamphleteering in the last quarter of the fourteenth century. As such, it builds on the important article written in 1926 by T. F. Tout, on parliament and 'public opinion',<sup>6</sup> and it draws on the more recent work of a number of literary scholars, most notably Kathryn Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice, who have argued for the existence in London in Richard II's reign of a vibrant, reform-minded, writing community made up of clerks, scribes and scriveners belonging to the 'civil service' and writing trades of the city.<sup>7</sup> It is a central tenet of Oliver's work that these civil servants were 'proto-parliamentarians', arch-advocates of parliament's role in guarding the kingdom's interests and bringing to account the misrule and corruption of the royal court. But Thomas Favent, Oliver argues, was no puppet of the Lords Appellant. His *Historia* resoundingly supports the attack launched by the Appellants against Richard's court, but it is the product of independent thinking, a text that captures the public mood of the time, or at least of the 'civil servants and government functionaries' amongst whom Oliver argues — in agreement with the earlier views of Tout and McKisack — that the tract was primarily circulated. Favent himself appears to have no special regard for the Appellants who are directly mentioned only a few times in his account, and even then without the unqualified enthusiasm one might expect of an author if he had been closely aligned with, or even directly commissioned by, the Appellant cause. Oliver's opinion is that the *Historia* presents an unaffiliated view of the crisis through the eyes of a well-informed and politically engaged bureaucrat.

Although, as we shall see, there are grounds to question some aspects of this new interpretation, on one point at least, there is little room for doubt. This is Oliver's contention that Favent was a Londoner, or at least a London resident, and observed the attack and subsequent purge of Richard II's household through the lens of the factional politics of the capital, and in particular as an enthusiastic supporter of

<sup>1</sup> For the following biographical details, see Clementine Oliver, 'New light on the life and manuscripts of a political pamphleteer: Thomas Fovent', *Historical Research*, 83 (2010), 60–8.

<sup>2</sup> See J.S. Roskell, Linda Clark and Carole Rawcliffe, *The history of parliament: the Commons 1386–1421*, 4 vols (Stroud, 1992), vol. 3, 113–14.

<sup>3</sup> May McKisack, 'Historia sive narracio de modo et forma mirabilis parliamenti ...', in: *Camden Miscellany XIV* (Camden 3rd series, London, 1926).

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Galloway, 'Appendix', in: *The letter of the law: legal practice and literary production in medieval England*, ed. Emily Steiner and Candace Barrington (Ithaca and London, 2002), 231–52.

<sup>5</sup> Clementine Oliver, *Parliament and political pamphleteering in fourteenth-century England* (Woodbridge, 2010). Oliver has modified the traditional spelling of Favent to Fovent because this is how his name appears in the records. I have kept to the original spelling on the basis that Favent is the nearest approximation to the spelling of his name in the *Historia*.

<sup>6</sup> T.F. Tout, 'The English parliament and public opinion, 1376–88', reprinted in: *Historical studies of the English parliament*, ed. E.B. Fryde and Edward Miller (Cambridge, 1970), 299–317.

<sup>7</sup> K. Kerby-Fulton and Steven Justice, 'Reformist intellectual culture in the English and Irish civil service: the *Modus tenendi parliamentum* and its literary relations', *Traditio*, 53 (1998), 149–202.

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