

An Unexpected Find – Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough (1660–1744) in the FBK Library's Fondo Antico

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A 'female player' in early modern transnational historiography.

The **rare book collection** of Fondazione Bruno Kessler's [Polo Umanistico](#) consists of roughly 1.800 titles. Started in the early days of the Italian-German Historical Institute ([ISIG](#)) and aimed at creating a core of primary sources for its researchers, its early modern multilingual portfolio reaches from legal, political and institutional history over tractates on natural and penal law to contemporary educational texts and more, including works of some well-known early modern thinkers and travelers, such as Johann Jacob Moser, Christian Thomasius or Jacob Jonas Björnsthål – you will even find a 16th century edition of Giovanni Boccaccio's *De mulieribus claris* (Engl. *On famous women*).

As a second-year master's student at Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg my personal interest in this special collection arose from an eight-week internship at ISIG, designed to introduce the various activities a position at a historical research institution can entail. Part of the work experience was a **hands-on approach to primary sources**.

And so, while browsing the so-called **Fondo Antico**, I stumbled upon a second edition of [Jacopo Sanvitale's](#) (1668–1753) *Memorie istoriche della guerra tra l'imperiale casa d'Austria e la reale casa di Borbone per gli stati della monarchia di Spagna dopo la Morte di Carlo II. Re Austriaco dall'Anno 1701 fino all'Anno 1713*, published by Venetian printer Giovanni Battista Recurti in 1734 (find the work [here](#)). Although a mouthful, as was typical for early modern historiography, the title describes the works content to the point: it is a detailed narrative of the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–1714). In about 740 pages, the author – a Jesuit cleric, writer and university instructor – examines the war's campaigns and battles, as well as its central political developments and turning points. **Unexpectedly, the work refers to the protagonist of my own master's thesis: Sarah Churchill, the Duchess of Marlborough (1660–1744).**

Since, generally speaking, the source portrays the history of 'great men', one should not be surprised to find that women play only a marginal role. Nonetheless, the author seems to have paid closer attention to England, admittedly one of the war's major players, which at the time was ruled

by a Queen: Queen Anne (1665–1714). He even attributes special subchapters to the so-called “Affari d’Inghilterra” (English affairs). **While these mainly serve as background information for the war on the continent, they also provide insights into the stories of the English court in the early 18th century from a *non*-English perspective.**

One of these stories is rather well known, not least of all because of its pop-cultural comeback triggered by the 2018 film [*The Favourite*](#) – a satirical, if slightly awkward re-telling of the **Queen’s famously close friendship with Sarah Churchill**. Many scholars suggest the two women may have been romantically involved. Whether this is true or not, based on her close relationship with the Queen, Sarah enjoyed enormous influence at court. As an advocate for her husband, the Duke of Marlborough (1650–1722), who remains well known as an important military leader during the War of the Spanish Succession, **but also considering her personal ambitions, Sarah has for a while now been recognized by most scholars as a central political figure of Queen Anne’s reign.**

In her time, Sarah, who first came to court as a lady-in-waiting to the then Princess Anne, was generally perceived as a tough, outspoken or at times downright dominating character. Sanvitale, for example, mentions her so-called “**impazienza femminile**” (634) as the main reason for her break with Anne in 1710, which led to her having to leave court and, later, the country. However, while still in favor of a reigning Queen (as opposed to a Queen Consort), Sarah held almost exceptional power for a female courtier of her time. In fact, the ways in which she tested and expanded her own agency – the term used to describe a person’s capacity to act or their power in a certain context – have been thoroughly discussed in the second half of the 20th century, mostly within a biographical frame.

That being said, this article is not about the – not entirely up to date – state of research. Instead, it is about a **change of perspective**. As most relevant sources concerning Sarah are English, **Sanvitale’s *Memorie istoriche* offer a unique view on how the Duchess was perceived** and, specifically, **which aspects of her time as the Queen’s Favorite seemed to be memorable** for the rest of Europe, and in this case Italy.

MEMORIE
ISTORICHE
DELLA GUERRA

T R A

L'IMPERIALE CASA D'AUSTRIA,

E L A

REALE CASA DI BORBONE

P E R G L I S T A T I

DELLA MONARCHIA DI SPAGNA

Dopo la Morte

DI CARLO II. RE AUSTRIACO

Dall' Anno 1701. fino all' Anno 1713.

DESCRITTE DA A. V.



IN VENEZIA, MDCCXXXIV.

PRESSO GIO: BATTISTA RECURTI.

CON LICENZA DE' SUPERIORI, E PRIVILEGIO.



Title page of Jacopo Sanvitale's *Memorie Istoriche*, 1734, FBK Library (Signature s-ar 3-C-39)

Luckily, there is no need to read the whole 740-page volume as he mentions Sarah only sporadically. Those who are familiar with Queen Anne's reign – or have watched the film – will recognize the context in which the author addresses her for the first time: The Duchess had

previously taken under her wing a cousin, Abigail Hill, who now threatened to replace her as the Queen's Favorite and, to her horror, played for the wrong team, influencing the Queen to sympathize with Sarah's political opponents. For Sarah, whose relationship with Queen Anne was already crumbling, this would not only mean the end of her influence at court but would serve a heavy blow to the so-called Whig faction, whom she advocated for. Sanvitale describes how Sarah and the Whig ministers devoted to her attempted to have the Queen's apparent new Favorite dismissed from Court but in the end did not go through with it, "so as not to inflict more bitterness on the Queen's spirit" ("per non ispergere maggiori amarezze nello spirito della Regina"), who, according to the author, was quite "disgusted" (disgustata) by the Duchess and her ministers (584). Later, when the Duchess was finally dismissed from court after many a conflict with the Queen, Sanvitale notes how she then left "the field free for her opponents to plot greater changes" ("si partì dalla Corte [...] lasciando libero il campo a' suoi contrari, di tramare maggiori cambiamenti"), suggesting the author did indeed regard Sarah as an important political player (586). With the Duchess gone, Sanvitale describes how her husband, the Duke of Marlborough, managed to hold on to the Queen's support, limiting his wife's fallout with her former patroness by dutifully handing Sarah's so-called dignities, that is, objects representing her offices at court, to the Queen, who saw this as a pleasing humiliation of her former friend. This, however, did little to change the outcome: In 1711, the Duke of Marlborough was officially dismissed as Captain-General. The pair went on to spend their exile on the continent and only returned to England on the eve of the Queen's death in 1714.

These brief mentions of the Duchess allow for several conclusions, but also further questions: For one, the author's remarks suggest that, **even beyond England's borders, Sarah was perceived as something of a political actor or at least an influential courtier.** This becomes clear when Sarah appears as the **leader of a group of ministers** to remove her cousin from court and by the description of a now-again playable field that she previously blocked. More noticeable, however, is Sanvitale's obvious focus on the famous **conflict surrounding the position of the Queen's Favorite.** Apparently, for Sanvitale the situation seemed equally formative of Sarah's life as it does to scholars today – its actual significance in the whole span of her life is, of course, debatable. Lastly, when the **author speaks of "female impatience", the reader catches a glimpse of how Sarah was perceived as a woman and may continue to speculate on how and where she did and did not fit the bill of her assigned gender role.**

Overall, Sanvitale's remarks do not differ all that much from what English sources have to say about the Duchess and what we know about her today. Still, some sources are even more interesting because of what they *do not* say. In a more detailed study, one would need to ask how and where the author acquired his information, what sources he used, by whom he was influenced and where he looked for subjective comments regarding the Marlboroughs: Did he feel sympathy or aversion towards them? Additionally, a closer look at the Duchess' own networks in a broader European context would be crucial to trace how she constructed her very own image. Unfortunately, a single article does not allow for quite as much necessary detail.

Although briefly, working with the *Fondo Antico* and this source especially offered an interesting **change of scene.** For my master's thesis, I will continue my work on Sarah Churchill from a more reconstructive angle, asking **how the way she was perceived might have been linked to her gender** and, more importantly, how she perceived herself as a woman: **Was**

gender, in her case, *really* as defining as we like to believe?

PERMALINK

<https://magazine.fbk.eu/en/news/an-unexpected-find-sarah-churchill-duchess-of-marlborough-1660-1744-in-the-fbk-librarys-fondo-antico/>

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