Majesty and the Arts: Queen Anne’s Cultural Revolution

Philip Smallwood
University of Bristol


If monarchs now matter little to artists (or artists to monarchs), there have been times when art and the governance of nations have seemed “harmoniously confus’d.” The very early years of the eighteenth century are well known for their harnessing of poetry and theater to the factional antagonisms of parliamentary politics. The patronage operating most famously was the hiring of artists in the service of party, and relations between royalty and the artistic culture of the period have perhaps gone comparatively unremarked because the reigning monarch had seemed to historians ineffectually obscure, or unduly impressionable, or simply a woman.

So a change now seems timely. And if “magisterial” is praise often accorded to the biggest and most ambitious books, in the case of James A. Winn’s monumental Queen Anne: Patroness of Arts, the description appears strikingly apt. Winn has constructed a work of encyclopedic proportions and mesmerizing detail, indispensable to the professional scholar, yet aimed in part (optimistically, perhaps) at the curious general reader. Numerous British and American archives have been consulted; a wide range of manuscript collections
and many hundreds of primary and secondary printed sources have been synthesized. The result is a sympathetic and painstaking account of the queen’s distinctive contract with ministers, artists, people, and Parliament.

In her prize-winning *Queen Anne: the Politics of Passion* (2012), the historical biographer Anne Somerset has comparatively little to say about poets, composers, and other artists who flourished in the first decade of the eighteenth century, concentrating on political intrigue and Anne’s spats with rival ministers. Somerset tells very affecting the moving human story of the monarch’s poignantly fraught and terminally deteriorating relationship with Sarah Churchill, the appalling Duchess of Marlborough. Winn covers this ground excellently too, with generous quotations from letters between Anne and Sarah placed at the epicenter of the volume, albeit as part of a more circuitous and digressive narrative overall (where extended chapters subheaded by day, month, and year cover many events within a period and are fixed thematically by their titles). This narrative can be achingly slow-paced—the work is very long, and its kaleidoscopic particularity creates a tension with the hope of reaching readers outside the academic fold. Winn in the process elaborates the many ways in which “arts” (in the modern gathered-together sense) are woven into the contemporary political and personal fabric, and he illuminates, in company with this, a further dimension of Anne’s temperament and taste.

Anne comes over as vulnerable in various ways. She suffered from persistent ill health and, in endlessly thwarted hopes of an heir to the throne, she was for much of her adult life “bigg with child.” But she is also revealed as a “Strict and religious Observer of [her] Word,” dignified, loyal to all who served her loyally, a pragmatic and principled, even idealistic, figure, and to the end, a partial enigma. Her personality, her femininity, her private tragedies, and her enthusiasms all play their parts in this phase of English cultural life, while the precarious statecraft of her reign reveals the resilience Anne brought to the task of saving the nation. Winn moves fluidly from text to context, and context to text, operating where necessary by tactful suggestion; where hard evidence is missing or remains ambiguous, he offers judicious deduction. This is not a work of rigid historical positivism. Historical imagination is exercised as the need arises and is in turn demanded of the reader. We view the period with a recharged sense of completeness and with attention to a biographical center hitherto overlooked: world events and the artifacts of cultural history are ready explanations for each other.

Anne’s familiarity with the stage, as child actress and audience, is part of her girlhood: she makes early acquaintance with John Crowne’s court masque *Calisto*, and Nathaniel Lee’s drama of *Mitridates*. Both plays afford Winn parallels with contemporary events and unfold Anne’s early life through intimacy with grown-up sexual and political situations in fictional-historical form.
Eighteenth-Century Life

Anne's youth was exposed to the burgeoning public arts of royal portraiture, dedicatory poems, and musical celebrations. Winn's subtitle, celebrating Anne as the artists' "Patroness," originates from an anonymous birthday ode printed before her coronation and serves as an epigraph to the volume. In the course of her reign, the dramatist and architect Sir John Vanbrugh commissioned a ceiling painting for his new Queen's Theatre depicting "Queen Anne's Patronage of the Arts." The financial patronage of poets or other artists that Anne furnished from the royal coffers may in the event be hard to assess, but Winn's drift is that Anne could galvanize an artistic community seeking invigoration after the indifference of William of Orange.

Prior to her coronation in 1702, and out of favor with Queen Mary, her sister, Anne withdrew from the court, and found time to pursue artistic interests undisturbed. Winn tells in fascinating detail how, while still a very young woman, Anne developed the passion for the arts that she brought to her official role, and so to her country. In Winn's exposition of specific examples of painting, poetry, or music against history and biography, the issues are sometimes painfully personal. Thus, Winn tells the story of a moment when Anne brings to mind a favorite poem by "her beloved 'Mr. Cowley'," where the country mouse is glutted at the feast furnished by his smarter host in town. The anecdote occasions Winn's critical examination of the verses, and the lines invite poetical enjoyment on their own terms, but Cowley's text also draws attention to Anne's consciousness of the disabling obesity that first made her an object of derision in her lifetime, and has permitted a certain amount of ignorant prejudice against her ever since.

Queen Anne: Patroness of Arts is a beautiful and generously illustrated volume. The work is richly informative, filled with anecdote and direct quotation while thoughtfully affording access to recordings of rare contemporary music, and musical settings for poetry, much of it not previously recorded. These are available through an associated website, while printings of original instrumental and vocal scores appear in attractive format on the page. An apparatus of extensive scholarly endnotes, many of a highly discursive nature, underpins the text. This is a study that blurs the boundary between biography and history. Winn comments with textbook authority on the great dramas and complex transactions of contemporary international events, including the Duke of Marlborough's glorious victories in Europe on the queen's behalf (for which Blenheim Palace was his magnificent reward), and on topics relating to Parliament or the court, with its endless religious and political shenanigans. Winn is scrupulous in tracing personal enmities, friendships, and reluctant, insecure, but necessary alliances. Yet he can also explain letters between Anne and her noble male or female counterparts or ministers with a literary critic's attention to vocabulary, syntax, shades of self-protective irony, or cunning insinuation.
At one point (439-40), Winn analyzes the role of cadence and stress patterns in the sermon delivered by Dr. Henry Sacheverell, a performance for which he famously faced trial. Winn’s volume elucidates deeper political meanings that a historian lacking an ear for linguistic resonance might miss.

As a commentator on the arts in their own right, Winn is equally assured. He writes engagingly on the consolations and entertainments of literature, theater, dance, opera, acting, gardening, and painting, and he is especially sensitive to the technical desiderata of contemporary musical composition, settings for poetry, interludes, and performance. This is a rare accomplishment for a literary commentator or cultural historian. One example of the work’s polymathic perspective is Winn’s attention to the role of theatrical expertise in executing regal pageants designed to remind the nation of the locus of power, legitimacy, and authority. He observes that Anne, as even King William before her, “understood the importance of maintaining the public drama of royal activities” (235).

Some works that touched the consciousness of Queen Anne are inevitably very minor art, and they gather meaning from the events that generated them: the poems by Cambridge students on the death of Anne’s only son, the eleven-year-old Duke of Gloucester, are a case in point. But Winn’s treatment of Anne, who on her coronation declared to both Houses of Parliament that her heart was “entirely English,” does more than appeal to an artistic milieu in order to draw historical conclusions. Winn shows that the narrative of her reign can invite renewed attention to some of the greatest musical genius of Western civilization: Ambrose Philips’s birthday ode for Anne of 1713 was “set by no less a composer than George Frideric Handel” (247). Anne’s reign is also the landscape for the great literary accomplishments composed in the shadow of Dryden’s death (1700), an event as momentous for the cultural life of the country as the tragic loss, in the same year, of Anne’s cherished heir to the throne.

Anne patronized major poetic productions of her lifetime—as Princess Anne, she and her husband, George of Denmark, subscribed to Dryden’s translation of Virgil of 1697. More problematically, perhaps, for Anne as the period’s “Patroness of Arts,” her reign precisely coincided with the early rise of Alexander Pope, Dryden’s worthiest successor, and the eighteenth-century’s greatest poet, who had no time for patrons. As the poet who single-handedly broke the system, Pope achieved a modern reputation based heavily on the angrier and more aggressive satires—both personal and political—of the 1730s and 1740s, yet the ease and delightfulness of Pope’s precocious decade, the optimistic period under Queen Anne, speaks of a writer working in more harmonious unity with his time than proved possible under the Hanoverians. As Anne sought to steer her country’s cultural energies at the start of a new
century, this is the happier Pope who had not yet retreated into an embattled defense of his poetic reputation, nor cultivated a self-image profoundly at odds with a degenerate age. Pope found his feet at the time of Queen Anne, and as a very young man composed some of his best poetical work. Winn calls Pope’s *Windsor-Forest* (1713) “the finest and most subtle poem on public affairs to appear during her reign” (601). He intimates that patronage of poets need not be personal to make a difference.

It follows that among the most suggestive pages of the volume are those devoted to the early Pope (too few, perhaps, for a work that quotes and discusses such a quantity of mediocre literature). *An Essay on Criticism* (1711) is usefully examined in parallel with the knife-edge politics of Anne’s negotiation of Whig and Tory or Protestant and Catholic passions, where “Parties in Wit attend on those of State,” and Winn is engagingly precise in explaining that Pope is “using political imagery to illustrate the aesthetic, psychological, and moral principles that form his true subject” (561). In teasing out the politics of this and other early poems, such as the two-canto version of the *Rape of the Lock*, Winn intriguingly conjoins contextual circumstance and literary quality: the “little Queen Anne’s man,” as Byron was later to call Pope, chimes in with his monarch’s determined anti-sectarianism, and offers poetic and critical analogies for her ambitions of political settlement, both at home and abroad. By affording a clearer knowledge of the period’s artistic milieu and of what it might mean to be “Patroness of Arts” at that time, Winn’s capacious mass of learning and broad-ranging reconstruction of cultural life under Queen Anne returns us to these poems in a more fully imagined contextual light.
