In 1736, a goldsmith called Henry Jernegan produced a silver medal as a lottery token, depicting George II’s consort Queen Caroline watering her garden. The motto proudly declared: “GROWING ARTS ADORN EMPIRE”. Improvement of public taste, and the anglicization of Continental art forms, as advocated by Lord Shaftesbury in his Essay on Design (1712) or Joseph Addison in his Spectator essays on English literature, were widely seen as top-down didactic duties. The background was resistance to French cultural hegemony, as well as to the rival imagery and patronage flowing from the Jacobite family in exile. These new biographies of Queens Anne and Caroline are in keeping with this eighteenth-century drive to treat cultural history as seriously as political and military history. They are major advances – both in scholarship and human empathy – on the standard works (by Edward Gregg in 1981/2001, and R. L. Arkell in 1939, respectively).

The championing of one monarch often begins with the denigration of his or her predecessors. James Anderson Winn’s nearly 800-page portrait of Queen Anne emphasizes that William III “never read poetry, listened to music, or attended the theatre”. It depicts Anne’s sister, Mary, as obsessed with mindless fringe-making, and notes that Mary Astell sought Anne’s support, not Mary’s, for her project advancing female education. Joanna Marschner, on the other hand, in her study of Queen Caroline, regards both William’s and Anne’s reigns as equally fallow in terms of artistic patronage: Caroline, she writes, “quickly surpassed the efforts of her royal predecessors since 1689”.

Winn, Professor of English at Boston University, has produced a book of unparalleled depth and insight about a period still relatively neglected owing to the taint of Whig history with which it remains associated. He writes with the fluency, but not the Whig bias, of Macaulay; his historical research on all aspects of the period, including its political turmoil, is impeccable, and yet his writing has essayistic clarity throughout. It is also truly unusual – even disorienting – to read an academic work in which literature illuminates history and history illuminates literature in such equal measure that neither discipline predominates.
Like the twentieth-century biographies that broke through the long-established image of Dr Johnson as the “Great Cham”, the first quarter of Winn’s book rips apart the stereotype of Anne as an insipid, immobile and corpulent figurehead. An engraving by Peter Vanderbank of Anne around the time of her marriage to Prince George of Denmark shows us a sexy young woman, who enjoyed riding, hunting, play-acting, the harpsichord and guitar, singing and dancing. At the same time, Winn is astute in showing how the Princess’s intense same-sex relationships were not only the product of that Court’s “remarkable fluidity of gender”, but also an escape from its cynicism, as well as the result of Anne’s craving for affection amid incredible losses. The infamous death toll of Anne’s children in later life (seventeen pregnancies, with only one child surviving past infancy, until the age of eleven) was tragically foreshadowed by her mother’s and her siblings’ early deaths.

Above all, the pressure of securing the Protestant succession dictated Anne’s fate. Her courtships by Georg Ludwig of Hanover and then by Prince George of Denmark were engineered by the Whigs, hard on the heels of frustrated attempts to pass the Exclusion Bills to bar a Catholic from the throne; and the psychological strain of competing against her Catholic stepmother to produce a healthy royal heir was immense. Winn’s attention to the circumstances in which Anne’s children died shames other biographers who have glossed over these details, and we are left with an understanding that for Anne to have been anything other than somewhat morose and self-pitying would have been superhuman. When it was clear that Anne would remain childless, cultural patronage was celebrated as an alternative source of her dignity; given that Anne also had to embody the kingly duties of administering justice and defending national liberties, this was a lot to expect of one woman.

Sarah Churchill, Duchess of Marlborough, has perhaps enjoyed more than her fair share of the historical limelight, yet there are sections of Winn’s narrative in which Anne’s famous favourite seems almost wilfully sidelined – most notably, the formative episode when Anne was twenty-seven and chose exile from her sister’s court in preference to giving up her intimacy with Sarah. Sarah’s own colourful account of these events goes unquoted. Her role in guiding Anne through the Revolution is also underplayed, though this is partly a consequence of Sarah’s having, in all probability, self-protectively destroyed the relevant batch of correspondence.

Winn uses the metaphor of “scriptwriters” behind the set-pieces of the Revolution, and is always alert to the symbolism behind political theatre, such as the coronations of James II in 1685 and of William four years later, at which men attended costumed as the Dukes of Aquitaine and Normandy in order to maintain the fiction that the kingdom still included parts of France. Anne certainly loved ceremony, and her own coronation consciously mimicked that of Elizabeth I, albeit with some bathos.

Nothing better evinces Anne’s early love of theatre than her love of Sarah, who had, as Winn fairly puts it, a greater range of emotional self-expression. Their relationship faltered almost as soon as Anne became queen, with Sarah, a Whig, refusing to accept Anne’s intention, as expressed to her Treasurer, “to be kept out of the power of both [parties]”. The extent to which this was royal hauteur rather than moderating statesmanship is unclear; Anne saw it as a question of both. Winn tends towards the vindication of his subject, but acknowledges the inconsistencies that arose
from the fact that Anne “lived in two time frames”, refusing to buy into the new Whig vision of history as “a struggle between liberty and oppression”.

The case for Anne as a major royal patron is strongest with regard to music, which also seems to be Winn’s most heartfelt personal enthusiasm. His first major book was a history of the relationship between music and poetry, from the ancient world to Schoenberg, and another 1998 publication printed his lectures accompanied by musical scores. Here, a companion website of musical recordings allows the reader to listen to exactly how, for example, Henry Purcell translated “political dissonances” into musical ones.

Purcell’s widow dedicated his posthumous works to Anne while she was still a princess, and Anne’s accession saved the royal musicians from penury in 1702. Anne regularly brought operas from the public theatres into her Court for her birthdays, and in 1713 enjoyed the latest compositions by Handel, to whom she granted an annual pension of £200. But Handel’s “employer” was the Elector of Hanover, not Anne, and it was the Marlboroughs, not Anne, who had called him back to London that year.

Winn does not give the usual explanation for Anne’s love of music and relative lack of interest in the visual arts, namely her lifelong myopia or “defluxion” (excessive watering) of the eyes. Certainly, her comments on portraiture were always concerned with its sentimental, proto-photographic function rather than any larger artistic merit. And though Winn brilliantly detects literary allusions in Anne’s private correspondence, showing that she absorbed poetry, especially from the theatre she saw, and used it with subtle irony in case her letters fell into the wrong hands, he never tries to suggest that Anne was a serious literary patron. The fact that she was alive to read Pope’s “Windsor Forest” (1713) is a tenuous connection, with nothing to indicate that she appreciated the poem as deeply as Winn does himself.

There is a noticeable thinness of surviving evidence about Anne’s personal contribution to events towards the end of her reign, including developments in music and literature. Biographers cannot resist partisanship with regard to Anne and the Marlboroughs, rather as every element of society in 1710 was forced to pick a party allegiance and wear its ribbon. Winn increasingly falls onto the side of his subject in later chapters, describing Sarah as the only one to be cruel, when in fact there seems to have been “faults on both sides”, as a contemporary book title put it. It is also a question of how much one’s own sympathies lie with a monarch trying to “retain the prestige and power of the Crown”.

One symptom of this retentiveness is regretted by Marschner: Queen Anne, “despite the Electress Sophia’s lobbying, had not encouraged any involvement from the Hanoverians in British affairs”. It would be interesting to know how conscious Anne was of cultural competition from the Hanoverian women. Caroline (Wilhelmine Karoline of Ansbach) had been educated in Berlin alongside two boys: her younger brother and the son of the Elector of Brandenburg later known as Frederick I of Prussia. Marschner makes it clear that the young Hohenzollern princess was also deeply influenced by some remarkable female role models: Electress Sophie Charlotte who held salons at Lützenburg and corresponded with
Leibniz about Locke; Electress Sophia whose gardens at Herrenhausen were a reply to those at Versailles; and Elisabeth Charlotte, Duchess of Orleans, another highly educated woman who amassed a significant art collection.

When Caroline arrived in London as Princess of Wales in October 1714, with her three young daughters, several months after Anne’s death, Lord Egmont therefore marvelled that Caroline “reads and converses on a multitude of things more than [her] sex generally does”. The fact that George I did not bring his own queen, meanwhile, made his daughter-in-law the senior female in the royal household, already de facto queen consort. She had been preparing for this role, with help from visiting Whig supplicants, since 1701, when the Act of Settlement had made her “conscious of her husband’s destiny”.

Those hoping that the Hanoverians would commission a swathe of new buildings were disappointed. Queen Anne’s failure to rebuild Whitehall or complete the plan for Hampton Court, choosing instead to retreat to Windsor, is excused by Marschner because she “suffered such ill-health”, and by Winn on the grounds that she was trying to avoid the architectural extravagances of her uncles, Charles II and the Earl of Clarendon. Especially after 1707, with the costs and death toll of the War of Spanish Succession mounting, it became impolitic for Anne to spend lavishly on any such project. How much the architectural modesty of the Hanoverians after the war was a deliberate policy is less clear. Certainly, they tried to make a virtue of not spending too much public money on private luxuries, in contrast to the Continental absolutists, but it is doubtful that the English knew or cared about the thousands of Frenchmen who died to irrigate Versailles. More likely the Georges simply lacked the cash and levers of power to build large palaces, with the unfortunate consequence that each Hanoverian heir apparent had to move out and establish their court in a separate house.

In terms of garden design, efforts sometimes cancelled each other out. Anne blamed William III and his favourite, the Earl of Portland, for neglecting the gardens at Kensington, and spent “more than £26,000”, according to Winn, on laying out formal parterres and a new orangery designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor. Caroline, following the new fashion for merely lending nature a helping hand, removed Anne’s parterres and oversaw the layout that remains, broadly speaking, Kensington Gardens today. Caroline’s gardening project at Richmond, on the other hand, did not survive Capability Brown, and Marschner’s evidence that Caroline took a “close and personal interest” in William Kent’s original designs there is skimpy (a letter referring to a book left open on her table). The fact that Kent worked on both her gardens and those of Lord Cobham at the same time, during 1735, means that Caroline cannot be credited with commissioning an innovation that others then imitated. If anything it was Marble Hill, Henrietta Howard’s villa and garden, designed as a companion piece to Richmond, which became the touchstone for aristocratic copycats.

Caroline’s commissions are interesting not for their quantity or quality, but for the complex messages she wanted to send with regard to science, theology and historiography. Marschner shows her tirelessly “legitimising and embedding . . . the fragile new dynasty”. She employed artists such as Godfrey Kneller, James Thornhill and Charles Jervas, whose styles communicated continuity with Anne’s reign, while elsewhere incorporating
surprising Gothic and Arthurian elements into her designs to suggest continuity between Britain’s ancient history and that of her family. The status and respectability that Caroline gave to the men of science she brought into her Court, like the equivalence given to the busts of scientists and theologians in her Hermitage pantheon, signposted the enlightened nature of the Hanoverian monarchy, whose very existence was based on rational utility.

At Richmond, Merlin’s Cave, a weird thatched cottage with several gherkin-shaped roofs and an ogee-shaped entrance, contained waxworks intended to reference the obscure connection between the medieval English kings and the House of Guelph, from which Hanover claimed its ancestry. It was all so arcane that the poet Stephen Duck and his wife had to be appointed as “hermit-interpreters” for the tourists there. Ironically, Marschner explains, this effort only showed up Caroline’s essential non-Englishness, since waxworks were then respectable on the Continent but considered vulgar in Britain.

Caroline was clearly knowledgeable about art, but her patronage of living artists was limited; Marschner’s chapter about fine art therefore focuses on the lucky fluke of Caroline’s discovery of a forgotten treasure trove of Old Master drawings and prints in a Kensington Palace bureau. The beautiful sketches by Holbein of the Tudor royals particularly fascinated Caroline and inspired her to start making, on a budget, her own picture closets, in imitation of the Kunstkammer she knew as a child. Marschner diligently catalogues the acquisitions and dispersals, displaying an expert familiarity with technical methods and terms. The ripe fruits of Marschner’s picture research also make this book as much a pleasure for the eye as Winn’s book is for the ear.

Given that Caroline was satirized in The Dunciad (1728) as the “Goddess of Dulness” for conniving with Walpole to leave Tory writers without patronage, the chapter on literature has a particularly strong case to answer. Unfortunately, beyond repeating the evidence that the Queen was an avid reader of writers with varying party allegiances, the constraints on her literary patronage are not explored. Caroline’s Privy Purse gifts to writers and their families (the crippled Richard Steele or Milton’s impoverished granddaughter) were pure charity – more Society of Authors benevolent fund than Man Booker Prize.

Caroline’s project to build a new library in St James’s Palace in early 1737 was a preparation, at fifty-four, for her retirement. Instead, it was where she collapsed from a stomach hernia that killed her days later, leaving the library project an unrealized dream. Again, her intentions were intellectually ambitious: to create “the first library compiled by a member of the royal family in Britain on universal encyclopaedic principles”, based on the model of Gabriel Naudé, the keeper of Cardinal Mazarin’s collections.

Both Winn and Marschner overstretch the claims of these monarchs as artistic patrons, and in doing so play down a more consequential historical development: the emergence in Britain of private centres of patronage and cultural criticism. Since the mid-1600s, there had been a decentralization of patronage towards aristocratic houses and universities, and this was now joined by the growing power of the City and general public. It has been assumed this filled a vacuum left by neglectful monarchs, but the growth of a leisureed, educated and empowered urban class
made this transition inevitable, whatever the Courts might have done. This was the context in which, as Winn recounts, political parties ran rival subscription concerts in rented venues that were attended by visiting European princes, and this was how *The Beggar’s Opera* (1728) succeeded commercially despite royal disapproval.

It is evidence of Anne’s modest patronage that she never got her Privy Purse into debt for art’s sake, and Caroline’s limited allowance similarly contrasted with the deeper pockets of friends like Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington, or Sir Andrew Fountaine. The Duchess of Marlborough thought Burlington odd to have lost his fortune for the sake of his architectural ideals, and certainly the physical hospitality of a Lord Burlington or a Jacob Tonson, who respectively had Handel and Congreve as lodgers in their own homes, was missing from the Augustan Court. To a large extent, Anne and Caroline participated in the rise of cultural consumerism alongside others of similar or greater income, rather than aspiring to a discrete court culture along Renaissance or Restoration lines. In both cases, their personal influence on ecclesiastical patronage was far more concrete: “Queen Anne’s Bounty” for the impoverished Anglican clergy, or her new London churches, are clearly attributable to her wishes, and Caroline (who had refused the Habsburg crown on religious grounds) installed substantial numbers of Low Churchmen in the Church of England. These days, however, this is not a theme that can headline a book, even by an academic press.

James Anderson Winn and Joanna Marschner are thus forced into an unwanted alliance with the panegyrists, like the anonymous poet who hailed Anne “the Patroness of Arts” in 1701. Unquestionably, the two reigns correlated with artistic flourishes, but the highlights are precisely those for which historians cannot give them credit: the elegance in the decorative arts that we now call Queen Anne style, the wit of Hogarth, or the writings of the satirical Scriblerians. In music, Anne deserves credit for appreciating and encouraging the talent that others imported. In her embracing of science, Caroline was certainly socially influential. However, the stubborn interest of the royals in their own royalty, its prerogatives and pomp, is also evident: Caroline planned a pantheon of royal ancestors, not literary heroes, for her library.

Both biographies succeed, above all, in conveying the sophistication of these women, married to far less culturally curious men. Anne had no daughter to whom she could bequeath her beloved harpsichord, but it is a touching hint of Caroline’s private aspirations that she hired the best artists in London to teach her daughters to paint, so that today the Dutch royal collection remains full of works by the hand of her eldest girl.