

SATIRE, INSTRUCTION AND USEFUL KNOWLEDGE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

Long before the Industrial Revolution was deplored by the Romantics or documented by the Victorians, eighteenth-century British writers were thinking deeply about the function of literature in an age of invention. They understood the importance of ‘how-to’ knowledge and mechanical expertise to their contemporaries. Their own framing of that knowledge, however, was invariably satirical, critical and oblique. While others compiled encyclopaedias and manuals, they wrote ‘mock arts’. This satirical sub-genre shaped (among other works) Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* and Edgeworth’s *Belinda*. Eighteenth-century satirists and poets submitted to a general paradox. The nature of human skilfulness obliged them to write in an indirect and impractical way about the practical world. As a result, their explorations of mechanical expertise eschewed useable descriptions of the mechanical trades. They wrote instead a long and peculiar line of books that took apart the very idea of an instructional literature: the Enlightenment mock arts. This title is also available as Open Access on Cambridge Core.

PADDY BULLARD teaches English Literature at the University of Reading. He is the author of *Edmund Burke and the Art of Rhetoric* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). His publications as editor include *The Oxford Handbook of Eighteenth-Century Satire* (2019) and *A History of English Georgic Writing* (Cambridge University Press, 2022). With James McLaverty he co-edited *Jonathan Swift and the Eighteenth-Century Book* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) and, with Alexis Tadié, *Ancients and Moderns in Europe* (2016). With Timothy Michael he is co-editor of volume 15 (Later Prose) of *The Oxford Edition of the Works of Alexander Pope*.

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The Enlightenment Mock Arts

PADDY BULLARD

University of Reading



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