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 unpractical 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.

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Published online by Cambridge University Press

Published online by Cambridge University Press

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The Enlightenment Mock Arts

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Published online by Cambridge University Press

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009460521

DOI: 10.1017/9781009460477

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When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781009460477

First published 2025

Cover image: Johan Joseph Zoffany, 'John Cuff' (1772), RCIN 404434. © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2024 | Royal Collection Trust.

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-1-009-46052-1 Hardback

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Published online by Cambridge University Press