



Bathing in Verse: Christopher Anstey, *The New Bath Guide*, and Georgian Resort Satire

Shaun Regan, Queen's University Belfast (UK)

s.regan@qub.ac.uk

Abstract:

This paper examines Christopher Anstey's *The New Bath Guide* and the resort satires that followed in its wake. The literary sensation of 1766, Anstey's poem went into its fifth edition within the year and was praised in lavish terms by contemporary readers. Hailing it as 'the only thing in fashion', the poet Thomas Gray pinpointed the work's 'new and original kind of humour'. Over the course of 15 verse epistles, the *Guide* details the attempts made by the unfortunate Blunderhead family to adapt to the behavioural codes and regulations of Bath society. Through narrating the family's mishaps, the poem presents a satiric exposé of the social rituals at Britain's premier resort for bathing and medicinal waters. Yet for all its fun at the expense of the Blunderheads, the *Guide* also conveys the many attractions of Bath, the contemporary allure of the 'Fine Balls, and fine Concerts, fine Buildings, and Springs, / Fine Walks, and fine Views, and a Thousand fine Things' on offer in the city.

Even as Anstey's poem mocked the diversions of Bath, then, it also advertised them, in a work that – as Gray observed – was itself a notable example of the fashionable leisure culture that was its subject. My particular focus in this paper is twofold. Firstly, I consider the nature of Anstey's depiction of Bath. Against its favourable contemporary reception, modern critics have tended to view the *Guide* as a work that lacks sufficient bite, and thus as something of a damp squib at the end of the Augustan satiric tradition. Yet this is to overlook the extent to which Anstey was purposely deviating from a satiric discourse which treated the resorts, particularly Bath, as sinks of iniquity and disease – in texts such as Ned Ward's *A Step to the Bath* (1700), *The Diseases of Bath* (1737) and, later, Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* (1771). What was 'new and original' about Anstey's *Guide*, I contend, was its establishment of an alternative register for evoking the world of provincial leisure: a more tempered and amiable satiric mode that was intimately connected to the culture of the resorts themselves. To develop this argument, I also consider the body of verse satires which, in various ways, responded to Anstey's poem: works such as *The New Brighthelmstone Directory* (1770), *The Cheltenham Guide* (1781) and *The*

Register of Folly (1783), which returned the focus to Bath and Bristol Hot Wells. Like Anstey's own *Guide*, these later works often drew their titles from the promotional guidebooks to the resorts. Many of them were written in the anapaestic verse form that came to be known as 'Anstey measure', while some also responded directly to Anstey's poem. Although they are by no means uniform in either tone or quality, these later-eighteenth-century verse narratives likewise maintained a fine balance between comic critique and popular advertisement. In the process, I argue, they extended the mode of amicable resort satire that Anstey had instigated in *The New Bath Guide*.

Biography:

Shaun Regan is a Lecturer in Eighteenth-Century and Romantic Literature at Queen's University Belfast. His research interests include prose fiction, comic discourse, the culture of politeness, and the early Black Atlantic. He is the author of *Making the Novel: Fiction and Society in Britain, 1660-1789* (Palgrave 2006, with Brean Hammond) and editor of *Reading 1759: Literary Culture in Mid-Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Bucknell 2013) and of *The Culture of the Seven Years' War: Empire, Identity, and the Arts in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Toronto 2014, with Frans De Bruyn). His most recent articles have appeared in the journals *Textual Practice*, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, *Irish University Review* and *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*.