The Longitude Act established a competitive environment which gave licence to a war of words between rival entrepreneurs, who recognized especially the unique cultural power of laughter. Irony, lampoon and caricature were not off-limits rhetorically within longitude proposals, and the satiric scrutiny subjected to competing schemes challenges our twenty-first century sense of appropriate discourse in scientific/technical writing.[[1]](#footnote-1) *The Longitudes Examin’d* (1714) by Jeremy Thacker, however, took such ironic deprecation to another level, seeking to expose not only the inadequacy of recent proposals, but also – by brazenly declaring its own mercenary interest – the fake modesty of other projectors. Whilst Thacker’s technical achievements have been lauded by some horologists, a case has been made for the parodic intention of the work as a whole, with its authorship attributed to the group of writers now known as the Scriblerians, and particularly Dr John Arbuthnot, physician, mathematician, and Fellow of the Royal Society.[[2]](#footnote-2) [Portrait, Wellcome Library, London] Certainly, Arbuthnot’s letters attest that he had been indulging his mathematical ability and comic imagination whimsically in the design of impractical, but technically-astute longitude solutions, such as a signalling network of light-houses, not dissimilar to an anonymous proposal put forward (apparently seriously) later that year.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As physician-in-ordinary to Queen Anne, Arbuthnot lived in apartments at St. James’s Palace, and there hosted meetings with his fellow wits, including Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope and John Gay, in which they laid plans for their collaborative *Memoirs of Martinus Scriblerus* (published 1741), a mock-biography of a buffooning natural philosopher, antiquarian and projector, whose parodic schemes include several longitude methods.[[4]](#footnote-4) Upon the Queen’s death in August 1714, Arbuthnot moved to Dover Street in Piccadilly, where he continued to generate scientifically-inspired mirth individually and collaboratively, in works such as *The Humble Petition of the Colliers* (1716). Swift, meanwhile, returned to Ireland, where his experience of the longitude endeavour took on a more tragic colouring, as he tended to the needs of his friend Joseph Beaumont, an amateur mathematician whose mental illness (and eventual suicide, in late 1726) was attributed to an obsession with solving the longitude problem. The psychological frailties of the projectors in the fictional Academy of Lagado (witnessed by Swift’s most famous literary creation, Lemuel Gulliver) perhaps owe something to Beaumont, whom Swift had attempted to commit to Bedlam in 1722.[[5]](#footnote-5) Swift’s friend, who died nearly a decade prior to the appearance of *A Rake’s Progress*, therefore seemed to confirm that longitude lunacy was more than just a satirical trope, and that the Longitude Act had human, as well as economic, costs.

1. See Gregory Lynall, ‘Scriblerian projections of longitude: Arbuthnot, Swift, and the agency of satire in a culture of invention’, *Journal of Literature and Science*, 7: 2 (2014), 1-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Jonathan Betts and Andrew King, ‘Jeremy Thacker: Longitude impostor?’, *Times Literary Supplement*, Issue 5529 (20 March 2009), 6; Pat Rogers, ‘Satire as Mock-Science: The Scriblerians and the Search for the Longitude’, in *Documenting Eighteenth Century Satire: Pope, Swift, Gay, and Arbuthnot in Historical Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 45-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Arbuthnot to Swift, 17 July 1714, and Swift to Arbuthnot, 25 July 1714, in *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, D. D.*, ed. David Woolley, 4 vols (Frankfurt amMain: Lang, 1999-2007), II, 11-12, 26 (hereafter Woolley); *An Essay Towards a New Method To Shew the Longitude at Sea; Especially near the Dangerous Shores* (London: E. Place, 1714). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *The Memoirs of the Extraordinary Life, Works, and Discoveries of Martinus Scriblerus*, ed. Charles Kerby-Miller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1950), pp. 167-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Knightley Chetwode to Swift, 25 April 1715, and Swift to Rev. Daniel Jackson, 26 March 1722, in Woolley, II, 120, 418. See Lynall, ‘Scriblerian projections of longitude’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)