
HARDY GRANT, York University, Toronto

Eighteenth-century mathematics: the naysayers

Some skepticism attended the dramatic Enlightenment progress made in mathematics and in its applications. The most interesting dissent came from certain observers who could claim to be well informed and even sympathetic. Diderot and Buffon urged that mathematics is too tautologous and abstract to have more than a limited role in natural philosophy, and that its study was therefore destined to become increasingly marginal. I shall try to set these assertions in context, and I shall cite another famous figure of that age who countered them—coiently, as history would prove.