ARCHITECTURE AND POLITE CULTURE IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND: BLACKSTONE'S ARCHITECTURAL MANUSCRIPTS

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Sir William Blackstone (1723 – 1780) is a significant historical figure, known to historians as a judge and as the author of the highly influential Commentaries on the Law of England (1765 – 1769). An enormous scholarly literature has been devoted to Blackstone’s legal thought. As Prest recently observed however, biographers have long acknowledged the existence of Blackstone’s interest in architecture, yet its “duration, depth and significance [has] never been properly explored or appreciated”.1 This thesis takes up that challenge, arguing that an understanding of his unpublished architectural treatise, ‘Elements of Architecture’ (1746 – 1747),2 enriches our understanding of Blackstone and of his jurisprudence. The thesis seeks to establish, for the first time, architecture’s role in Blackstone’s life and intellectual development. It endeavours, most importantly, to determine the extent to which the use of architectural metaphor in his great legal text might offer a new perspective on his reputation as an arch conservative and upon the methodology and very genesis of the Commentaries. The thesis has three major aims: to situate Blackstone’s treatise within its biographical, historical and intellectual contexts; to conduct a detailed examination of the manuscript and, thirdly, to identify key issues and questions worthy of further research. Thus, it adopts an innovative methodology: that of a scholarly edition of Blackstone’s Elements of Architecture. Part one comprises an extended introduction to the ‘Elements’; part two constitutes an edited and annotated transcription of the manuscript and an Appendix provides relevant illustrations.

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