The Bienséances and their Irrelevance to the Death of Camille in Corneille’s Horace

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The murder of Camille by her brother Horace at the climax of Act 4, scene 5 of Corneille’s Horace (first performed in 1640, first published in 1641) proved controversial both in the seventeenth century and since. It is often evoked in modern discussions of seventeenth-century dramatic theory and practice. Corneille himself fed the controversy by the way he framed his own critical account of the play in the “Examen”, first published in 1660.¹ The murder of Camille is the topic he broaches first, and he claims to agree with his critics that it spoils the play and prevents it from being his best. In this and a related article² I aim to question some of the received opinions about the nature of the controversy in order better to understand the play and aspects of dramatic theory of the mid-seventeenth century. The other article deals with the whole of Corneille’s argumentation about Camille’s death in the first paragraph of the “Examen”, attending to the evidence of performance, to matters of material bibliography and to the many intertexts woven into Corneille’s account. Clearing the ground for my discussion in the other article, the current one deals with one particular problem, which has been created by modern critical discussion. Can bienséance or bienséances serve as a useful critical term for understanding the issues surrounding the death of Camille? It seems to me that modern critics too readily reach for this term, as if it had a legitimate explanatory value. Thereby they short-

² “The Death of Camille in Corneille’s Horace: Performance, Print Theory”, see in this issue, pp. 441-462.
circuit the complexity and subtlety of Corneille’s account.³ The bienséances raise more problems than they solve. The word “irrelevance” in my title is meant to be deliberately provocative and to suggest that the article aims as much to reorientate our understanding of this critical concept as to elucidate the “Examen” of Horace.

The Death of Camille as a Critical Problem

The death of Camille occurs in the following dramatic context. Horace and his two brothers have represented the state of Rome in a fight against Curiace and his two brothers representing Rome’s enemy Alba. The outcome of the fight is for a long time uncertain, but in Act 4, scene 3 it is announced that Horace is the only surviving combattant of the six, and that he has single-handedly triumphed over the three Albans. The news causes much rejoicing for his father le vieil Horace, but not for his sister Camille, since he has killed her Alban fiancé Curiace. Corneille prepares the audience to experience a bitter confrontation between brother and sister. This is how Camille anticipates her behaviour towards him: “Offensez sa victoire, irritez sa colère, / Et prenez s’il se peut, plaisir à lui déplaire” (4.5, 1247-48, Cottenham). When Horace appears and invites her to admire his victory, she attacks his brutality; and when he asks her to think first and foremost of the interests of Rome, she speaks vituperatively and apocalyptically, conjuring up a vision of the pleasure she would take in Rome’s ultimate defeat. This speech whips Horace into such a state that he draws his sword and kills Camille.

This is the moment that Corneille focusses on when he begins his own critical examination of the play. He is clear in his agreement with his critics that Camille’s murder spoils the end of the play. “Tous veulent que la mort de Camille en gâte la fin, et j’en demeure d’accord” (p. 839). But he thinks that people generally fail to understand the reason why Camille’s death is so damaging. He reports the commonly alleged reason, and this is the sentence that gives some evidence for what might happen on stage: “On l’attribue communément à ce qu’on voit cette mort sur la Scène, ce qui serait plutôt la faute de l’Actrice que la mienne, parce que quand elle voit son frère mettre l’épée à la main, la frayeur si naturelle au sexe lui doit faire prendre la fuite, et recevoir le coup derrière le théâtre, comme je le marque dans cette impression” (p. 839). This sentence is often quoted as evidence that in

earlier performances of the play, Horace ran his sword through Camille on stage in front of the spectators. The tenses are problematic, however. The present indicative in the phrase “on voit cette mort sur la scène” seems to make it clear that Camille’s murder and death are visible on stage. But the conditional in the following relative clause “ce qui serait plutôt la faute de l’actrice que la mienne” might imply that, if Camille’s death was visible on stage, this was only occasional; it was accidental; and it was the fault of the actress when she failed to exit with sufficient speed. Corneille’s subsequent comment seems to suggest that at no point had he expected Camille’s death to be visible on stage. A skilled actress, as soon as she sees Horace draw his sword, should know that, to play a fearful woman plausibly, she should immediately run away, and so it should be only off stage that Horace catches and kills her. The final clause “comme je le marque dans cette impression” has been taken by most critics to imply that Corneille revised the text of his play to make it clear to actors what should already have been clear, but perhaps was not clear enough to all actors, that the murder and death should happen off stage. At this point Corneille refers (tentatively) to the possibility of a rule forbidding the depiction of violence on stage. He cites the Roman poet Horace “qui ne veut pas que nous y hasardions les événements trop dénaturés”, whilst suggesting that Horace does not make this into a general rule. All these reflexions on this passage of the “Examen” are open to question – the reason for the alleged dramatic weakness, what the audience sees on stage, the play’s textual variants in the editions from 1641 to 1660, the matter of a rule about the portrayal of violence on stage – and they are explored in my other article on the topic (see note 2 above).

The current article focusses critically on a move made by many modern commentators at this juncture. Instead of exploring the interpretative problems, they seize on Corneille’s reference to Horace’s Ars Poetica and his distaste for “les événements trop dénaturés”. They comment as if there were a straightforward ban on the depiction of violence on stage, and, by a kind of sleight of hand, they explain all this – the ban on violence and Corneille’s problems with Camille’s death – with reference to the alleged authority of the bienséances. This is Bénédicte Louvat’s gloss on violence on stage: “ces situations de violence extrême, constitutives, par leur caractère extraordinaire et transgressif, de la tragédie, n’ont pas droit de cité sur la scène en vertu du respect des bienséances”.4 John Lough makes the same point: “The bienséances also ruled out the depiction on the stage of all forms of violent action such as duels, battles, and murders”.5

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bienséances, Louvat and Lough are in line with comments made by Scherer and Escola specifically on the significance of the bienséances for the death of Camille. For Scherer the bienséances are disobeyed if the actress playing Camille dies on stage rather than in the wings: “l’actrice qui jouait Camille mourait en scène, et mécontentait ainsi les spectateurs attachés aux bienséances”. For Escola Corneille’s alleged revisions to the play signal his submission to the bienséances: “Corneille s’assujettissait donc aux bienséances, en évitant d’’ensanglanter le théâtre”.

Modern Accounts of the Bienséances

Now, modern critics of seventeenth-century drama use the word very frequently, sometimes in the singular, mostly in the plural as if they were referring to a seventeenth-century critical concept connected with the prohibition of what can be shown or spoken on stage. The concept is, moreover, usually presented as an important one in their accounts of the dramatic theory of the time, and it is often given equal prominence to another concept, vraisemblance. So, for instance, Louvat devotes some pages of her manual to the topic “Vraisemblance et bienséances dans la représentation”, and she explains the relationship between the two as follows: “Le principe de la vraisemblance règle tout particulièrement, on le verra, la conception du temps et du lieu théâtraux. Quant au choix des actions à représenter, il est dépendant des bienséances” (p. 79). Her explanation of the bienséances is that they govern the dramatist’s relationship with his audience. Crucially, in order to please the audience, he must not shock them: “il faut d’abord ne pas le choquer. En même temps qu’elles prescrivent des motifs et des situations, les bienséances ont donc un rôle prohibitif, dans la mesure où elles interdisent au dramaturge de représenter certaines actions, et nommément les actions violentes” (p. 79). The remainder of her account of the bienséances is entirely to do with the proscription of violent action on stage.

This linking of vraisemblance and bienséances is common. John Lough: “Two other concepts to which theorists of the time attached great importance were those of vraisemblance (“verisimilitude”) and les bienséances (“the proprieties”). Neither of these terms is as easily defined as a clear-cut rule like that of the three unities; though seventeenth-century theorists and play-

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wrights continually used these two terms, unfortunately they did not define them with any great precision for the benefit of posterity” (p. 106).

These summary statements by Louvat and Lough owe much to the tradition represented by Scherer in his account of dramatic theory in La Dramaturgie classique and essentially promulgated before him by René Bray.8 Scherer devotes two chapters to general theoretical concepts, one called “les vraisemblances” (part 3, ch. 1), the other “les bienséances” (part 3, ch. 2). Both are presented as concepts relating to the impact of the play on the audience. As Scherer puts it, “l’étude des bienséances consistera surtout à déterminer ce qui était considéré comme malséant par les spectateurs du théâtre classique” (p. 383). He states that “la bienséance est une exigence morale; elle demande que la pièce de théâtre ne choque pas les goûts, les idées morales, ou, si l’on veut, les préjugés du public” (p. 383). And accordingly his chapter considers vulgar or sexually suggestive expressions, references to daily life, fights and deaths as targets for proscription by the bienséances.

It is in this context that he discusses the “Examen” of Horace and claims that the play’s original spectators, being attached to the bienséances, were offended by the spectacle of Camille’s death on stage (p. 418). The equal importance Scherer attaches to these two general concepts derives from Bray’s foundational account. Bray devotes part 3 of his book to “les règles générales de la doctrine classique”, chapter 1 to “la vraisemblance” and chapter 2 to “les bienséances”. To his credit, Bray recognizes the complexity of the term bienséance: “la bienséance est une chose complexe” (p. 216). But he presents a systematized account, which takes its lead from Rapin’s presentation of the concept in 1674. Indeed Bray’s account begins with a quotation from Rapin: “Sans [la bienséance] les autres règles de la poésie sont fausses: parce qu’elle est le fondement le plus solide de cette vraysemblance qui est si essentielle à cet art. Car ce n’est que par la bienséance que la vray-semblance a son effet: tout devient vray-semblable dès que la bienséance garde son caractère dans toutes les circonstances”.9 In his account, Bray makes a distinction, which has proved very influential, between two types of bienséances: “les bienséances internes entre l’objet et sa propre nature, les bienséances externes entre l’objet et le sujet, c’est-à-dire le public” (p. 216). He situates the rise to prominence of the bienséances in the 1630s and identifies Chapelain and La Mesnardière as the key agents: “Ce n’est qu’au XVIIe, vers 1630, que la règle des bienséances s’établit vraiment en France […] Chapelain en est le promoteur, la querelle du Cid décide de

son succès, La Mesnardièrē la codifie et lui donne une rigidité et une importance nouvelle” (p. 218). And he famously calls La Mesnardièrē “le grand-maître des bienséances” (p. 220).10

If Scherer’s and Bray’s accounts of the bienséances were historically accurate, it might be plausible that Corneille’s comments on the death of Camille were determined by his, or his critics’ or his spectators’ preoccupation with the bienséances. But a reading of theoretical writings from the three decades up to 1660 suggests a rather different account of bienséances, which removes its conventionally attributed explanatory power over the “Examen” of Horace altogether. I acknowledge here the contribution of Jean-Yves Vialleton in his work on the behaviour of characters in seventeenth-century tragedy. He examines some of the definitions of bienséances (and bienséance) in the period. His conclusions are critical of Scherer and attentive to the problems to which the terms give rise: “La bienséance est moins une catégorie normative de la doctrine classique qu’une notion ambiguë constituant un problème esthétique à résoudre”.11 Vialleton’s discussion, however, is based on a synchronic approach to the century as a whole. What interests me here is what the terms bienséance and bienséances could have meant to dramatists and dramatic theorists in the years up to 1660 when Corneille was reflecting on the ending of Horace, and whether they can have meant what modern critics mean by them. The following pages pursue a line of inquiry opened up by Brunn and Karsenti, whose own

10  Although I have given Louvat and Lough as examples of those who sum up and repeat the accounts of Bray and Scherer, there are many others. See, for instance, Pierre Pasquier, “Les Apartés d’Icare. Eléments pour une théorie de la convention classique”, Littératures classiques, 16 (1992), 79-101, for whom Camille should be killed off stage “conformément à la bienséance” (p. 80); Christian Delmas, La Tragédie de l’âge classique 1553-1770 (Paris: Seuil, 1994) (his discussion of the construction of tragedies is headed, and attaches equal weight to, “Vraisemblance et bienséance” (pp. 194-207), though he gives no definition of bienséance and no seventeenth-century account of the term); Alain Génetiot in his substantial manual Le Classicisme (Paris: PUF, 2005) deals with vraisemblance and bienséance in his chapter on “Le Pacte d’illusion mimétique” (pp. 281-331) and presents them as a pair of concepts triumphing together after 1630: “Comme la vraisemblance, [la bienséance] s’impose d’abord au théâtre avec la victoire des réguliers au début des années 1630” (p. 302).

discussion of the character of Horace shows sensitivity to the difference between modern and early modern uses of the term bienséances.\textsuperscript{12}

Bienséances in the Mid-Seventeenth Century

The two major systematically presented works of dramatic theory from the mid-seventeenth century are La Mesnardière’s Poétique (first published 1639) and d’Aubignac’s Pratique du théâtre (1657).\textsuperscript{13} One of the most striking differences between these works, on the one hand, and modern critical accounts of theory in the period, on the other, is that the equal prominence nowadays accorded to vraisemblance and bienséances is nowhere in evidence. D’Aubignac devotes a chapter to vraisemblance, but not to bienséances. And, as is well known, vraisemblance is the cornerstone of d’Aubignac’s view of theatre, or, as he puts it, “le fondement de toutes les Pièces du Théâtre […] l’essence du Poème Dramatique, et sans laquelle il ne se peut rien faire ni rien dire de raisonnable sur la Scène” (Baby, 123). Accordingly the term is used repeatedly throughout the Pratique as the prism through which all other dramaturgical features are perceived. Unsurprisingly, the words vraisemblance and vraisemblable have by far the largest number of entries in the index of terms in Hélène Baby’s edition of d’Aubignac’s work. More surprisingly, perhaps, bienséances does not figure as a term (in either the singular or the plural) in her index. D’Aubignac does use the word, only in the singular, and I have found only 6 occurrences in over 450 pages of text.

La Mesnardière devotes chapters to neither of these terms, but that is because the main organizing principle of his book is the same as Aristotle’s: a definition of tragedy; the quantitative parts of a play; and the six qualitative parts, which in La Mesnardère’s terms are “la fable”, “les mœurs”, “les sentiments”, “le langage”, “la disposition du théâtre” and “la musique”. La Mesnardière himself generously provided readers with an excellent index. Vraisemblance figures prominently, and the way La Mesnardière subdivides the entry makes it clear that, as is the case for d’Aubignac, vraisemblance is such an important concept that it has implications for almost the whole range of topics covered: for the choice of “fable”, for the presentation of “mœurs” and “sentiments” and for the “disposition du théâtre”. La Mesnar-

\textsuperscript{12} Alain Brunn and Tiphaine Karsenti, “Pourquoi Horace s’enfuit-il? La bienséance, rapport ou limite”, Dix-septième siècle, 223 (2004), 199-212 (especially pp. 205-09).

dière’s index is 22 pages long, in two columns, but it has no entry for *bienséances*. This is odd for someone who has acquired the title of “grand-maître des bienséances”. He does of course use the term, but less frequently and in a considerably more limited way than modern critical accounts suggest.

So what role does the term *bienséances* play in theoretical writing in the mid-seventeenth century? As Bray says (p. 218), Chapelain is its main promoter. But Chapelain only conceives of it in the singular and he is quite clear about the significance to be attached to it. He uses it in the second of the two versions of the *Discours de la poésie représentative*, composed in 1635, possibly as a sketch for the Académie’s intended work on poetics: “[Les poètes] ont particulièrement égard à faire parler chacun selon sa condition, son âge, son sexe; et appellent bienséance non pas ce qui est honnête, mais ce qui convient aux personnes, soit bonnes, soit mauvaises, et telles qu’on les introduit dans la pièce”.14 What is helpful about this statement is that Chapelain clearly distinguishes two senses of the word *bienséance*: a general sense, “ce qui est honnête”, and a sense peculiar to poetics, which is to do with making dramatic characters say things that are appropriate to the status that the dramatist first gives them. Characters do not have to be conventionally “honnêtes”: they can be good or bad, as long as the dramatist treats them coherently. Essentially, for Chapelain, “la bienséance” is a distillation of Aristotle’s views on character that he had already summed up in his preface to Marino’s *Adone* (1623) (ed. Duprat, pp. 186-218). Aristotelian “bonté”, “convenance”, “ressemblance” and “égalité” are presented in strictly poetic, non-moralistic terms: “bonnes habitudes, non pas moralement parlant, mais en considération poétique” (p. 211). In particular he says that “le bon et le convenable” constitute “une espèce différente du bienséant” (p. 212), that is a poetic rather than a moral “bienséant”.

And the reason for Chapelain’s poetic approach to *bienséance* is *vraisemblance*. The illusion of reality is broken if characters are not presented coherently.15 This is the chief failing that Corneille was taxed with in the *querelle du Cid*. Scudéry, in fact, uses the word “vraisemblable” to make

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15 The best account of *bienséance* in the theoretical writings of the period (by which I mean the account that seems to me to tally best with the writings of the theoreticians of the period) is that by John Lyons, *Kingdom of Disorder: The Theory of Tragedy in Classical France* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1999). The subtitle of his section on *bienséance* (“The Verisimilar Character, or *Bienséance*”) makes clear his poetic understanding of the term as used by mid-century theoreticians.
his accusation: “il est vrai que Chimène épousa le Cid, mais il n’est point vraisemblable qu’une fille d’honneur épouse le meurtrier de son Père”.

Corneille’s failing, according to Scudéry, is that the illusion of reality is endangered by this incoherent treatment of Chimène: it is unbelievable that a character first presented in the play as honorable would agree to marry her father’s murderer on the day of the murder. Giving his considered assessment of the controversy in the Sentiments de l’Académie Française sur Le Cid, Chapelain upheld Scudéry’s observation, and gave it its more precise terminology: “la bienséance des mœurs d’une fille introduite vertueuse n’y est [pas] gardée par le poète lorsqu’elle se résout à épouser celui qui a tué son père” (ed Duprat, p. 288). The issue is clearly that the opinions expressed by Chimène at the end of the play are not consistent with those she expresses earlier. For Chapelain, this strains vraisemblance: “avoir fait consentir Chimène à épouser Rodrigue le jour même qu’il avait tué le comte […] surpasse toute sorte de créance” (p. 292). He refers to “la bienséance” several times in the course of the Sentiments, always in terms of coherence of character presentation within the fiction. He also makes it clear that it is a main contributory factor towards the achievement of vraisemblance: “Comme plusieurs choses sont requises pour produire le vraisemblable, à savoir l’observation du temps, du lieu, des conditions, des âges, des mœurs et des passions, la principale entre toutes est que chacun agisse dans le poème conformément aux mœurs qui lui ont été attribuées” (p. 288). I am insisting on this technical, poetic sense of the word bienséance, since that seems to me to be the sense that Chapelain clearly attaches to it. It is strictly internal bienséance, to use Bray’s terminology. I do not wish to imply, however, that Chapelain’s outlook is entirely aesthetic and free from moral judgement. That is not the case. Chapelain believed that the ultimate aim of drama was to provide a useful lesson to spectators and that one way to do this was to show good behaviour rewarded and bad behaviour punished. He also, therefore, takes issue with Chimène’s consent to marry Rodrigue on the grounds that it sets a bad example (p. 289). He thinks that, in terms of moral utility, the ending could only be thought acceptable if Chimène were to receive some kind of punishment for her behaviour (p. 294) or if it turned out that her father had not really died after all or that he was not her real father or that the security of the state absolutely depended on her marriage to Rodrigue (p. 289). Chapelain is therefore attentive to the moral

Georges de Scudéry, Observations sur Le Cid in Corneille, Œuvres complètes, I, 785.

The significance of this passage is explained by Georges Forestier in Passions tragiques et règles classiques: essai sur la tragédie française (Paris: PUF, 2003), pp. 273-75, who shows how, paradoxically, it is precisely this recourse to aesthetic incoherence that allows Corneille to create conflict and excitement.
impact of the actions depicted because he believes in the moral utility of theatre. But the important point, for my argument, is that his moral concern is conceptually and terminologically distinct from the poetic concept of *bienséance* which is the requirement for coherent behaviour so that *vraisemblance* can be maintained.

La Mesnardière, who also believes in the moral utility of theatre, does not make as much of the *bienséances* as modern critical accounts suggest, though it is perhaps easy to see why he has been accorded special recognition. He is the first person to use the concept in the plural form, and he uses two images that *seem* to promote it as a concept to a very prominent position. At one point he mentions “cet *Art des Bienseances*” (p. 242, his italics), at another he alludes to “la Règle des *Bien-séances*, tres-nécessaires sur la Scène” (p. 293, his italics), and at yet another he describes drama as “le Théatre des Bienséances” (p. 247). But these descriptions should not blind us to the fact that he does not make much use of the term in the *Poétique* and he uses it in only a limited context. In fact he uses it only in his chapter on “les sentiments”, a term used to refer to the content of characters’ speeches. He does not use it when discussing “la fable” (plot) nor, interestingly, when discussing “les mœurs” (characterization). Moreover, even in his chapter on “les sentiments”, his use of the term *bienséances* is very limited. After an introductory discussion of “sentiments” in general, he divides his chapter into 7 parts: “les sentiments forcés” (discourse that, in order to bring about a certain effect, is too obviously artificially constructed), “les sentiments abusifs” (mingling sacred discourse with profane, of which he does not approve), “les sentiments trop élevés” (discourse that is too clever or too poetic for its context), “les sentiments inégaux” (characters speaking contradictorily), “les sentiments incivils” (characters addressing their social superiors without proper terms of respect), “les sentiments déshonnêtes” (indecent and sexually suggestive language), “les sentiments horribles” (the kind of language, especially descriptions, that might provoke horror incompatible with the arousal of pity and fear).

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18 The evidence of the *Poétique* makes it hard for me to agree with Génétiot that “la *Poétique* de La Mesnardière montre pour les bienséances une véritable obsession” (*Le Classicisme*, p. 302). Seeing the *bienséances* through the eyes of Bray and Scherer seems to lead critics to see the term where it cannot be found. Whilst La Mesnardière uses the term to discuss “les sentiments”, but definitely not to discuss “les mœurs”, Pierre Pasquier claims that “La Mesnardière affecte à la bienséance deux objets différents, les mœurs et les sentiments, et consacre à chacun d’entre eux un fort long chapitre”, which Pasquier then summarizes as if La Mesnardière conceived of both “mœurs” and “sentiments” in terms of *bienséances* (Pierre Pasquier, *La Mimésis dans l’esthétique théâtrale* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1995), p. 87).
Though La Mesnardièrè does not often use the term, he uses the plural to indicate the poetic sense, which he shares with Chapelain (though Chapelain uses the singular), and the singular when he uses the term to refer to decent behaviour in real life (the sense that Chapelain says is distinct from the poetic sense). In terms of poetics, La Mesnardièrè’s discussion of character discourse is in line with that of Chapelain, and derived from Aristotle. He says in his introductory pages to the chapter: “[Aristote] ne veut que dans son Poème [le Poète] fasse dire aux Personnages les choses qui leur conviennent” (p. 237). This is what he means by “cet Art des Bienseances” and he spells out the consequences of not having mastered it: “plusieurs des Pöetes modernes […] font parler d’une étrange sorte les Personnes qu’ils représentent” (p. 243). When he gives examples, the unfortunate effect adumbrated is an aesthetic one, a clash with vraisemblance: “Un Amant [de la maniére de quelques-uns de ces Messieurs] ne paroîtra généreux qu’en accomplissant en un jour cent Avantures de Romans, qui surpassent toute creance” (p. 243, my italics); “ces termes absolus qui conviennent aux Potentats, seroient tout à fait ridicules dans la bouche d’un Bourgeois” (p. 245, my italics).

Throughout the chapter, La Mesnardièrè is concerned with consistent, plausible speech. He uses the term bienséances (in the plural) in only two of his subsections in the chapter on “les sentiments”. The first is that on “les sentiments incivils” in which he says that some ancient dramatists erred by writing uncivil language “si directement contraire à la Règle des Bien-séances, tres-necessaires sur la Scéne” (p. 292). La Mesnardièrè’s point is that, in life, the socially inferior should address their superiors in respectful terms, and his comments here seem to mingle aesthetic and moral notions. He comments on his examples as being likely to provoke, in spectators, an effect of strangeness, which I take to imply a clash with vraisemblance: “n’est-il pas étrange de voir Jason & Médée […] se dire un million d’injures?” (pp. 294-95). Alongside the poetic incoherence which he points out, there might also be a note of moral censure in some of his descriptions of incivility: “Electre […] est infiniment blasmable de parler si insolemment à Clytemnestre sa Mere” (p. 298). It is as if La Mesnardièrè, in places, blurs the boundary between poetic bienséance and conventionally moral bienséance, a boundary Chapelain had carefully maintained, and that La Mesnardièrè is fully aware of. A similar blurring of poetic and moral criteria for

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19 The term bienséance (in the singular) comes to be a standard term for good behaviour in real life, but this is generally later in the century, to judge from the titles of courtesy manuals: abbé Piques, Discours sur la bienséance (Paris: Veuve de Sébastien Mabre-Cramoisy, 1688), Jean Baptiste de La Salle, Les Règles de la bienséance et de la civilité chrétienne (Troyes, 1703).
judging speech occurs in his next section on “les sentiments déshonnêtes”, but he never loses sight of the perceived poetic need for bienséance. So when he addresses the question of sexually suggestive language, La Mesnardière might strike us as unexpectedly permissive: “pourveu que le Poëte demeure dans la Bienseance du sexe & de la condition, il peut faire aller l’amour iusques à l’embrasement” (p. 311). What matters, above all, is that a character should always speak in a way that coheres with the information presented about that character.

A final word about La Mesnardière. His discussion of the representation of violent action on stage occurs in his chapter on “les mœurs” (pp. 199-216). His pages constitute a sustained dialogue with Castelvetro, and the criteria he invokes are the illusion of reality and the emotions appropriate to tragedy. Not once, when discussing violence on stage, does he refer to the bienséances.

If d’Aubignac is consistently preoccupied with vraisemblance, the bienséances do not figure prominently in his theoretical landscape. He never uses the word in the plural form and uses it only six times in the singular. One of these occurrences has the sense of “conventional decency” and has nothing to do with dramatic theory (p. 451). One has the sense of “conventional decency” in real life which is then applied to a dramatic situation. The context is the use of the rhetorical figure of apostrophe. D’Aubignac warns against a character making a long apostrophe to someone or something absent in the presence of a father, a judge or a king because “il est contre la bienséance et le devoir qu’un homme, étant devant un autre de grande autorité, le quitte pour adresser sa parole à une personne absente, à une Idée, à une Chimère” (p. 478). The other occurrences all tally with Chapelain’s account of bienséance as coherent presentation of character through speech, as when d’Aubignac says that in order to analyse how the dramatic action can strike the audience as true, we need to examine “la vraisemblance de tout ce qui se fait dans un Poème, la bienséance des paroles, la liaison des Intrigues, et la justesse des Evénements” (p. 86 – see also pp. 87, 114, 135).

According to Bray, Corneille himself makes a decisive contribution to the theoretical development of the bienséances in 1660: “Corneille, qui dans ses préfaces antérieures n’avait jamais soufflé mot de la théorie des mœurs et des bienséances, s’en fait, dans les Discours et les Examens, un souci essentiel” (p. 223). This does not concur with my own reading of the Discours. Corneille makes extensive use of the term vraisemblance and its cognates, and the word “vraisemblable” figures in the title of the second Discours. Of course, he often alludes to vraisemblance in order to contest the sense and importance attached to it by the likes of Chapelain and
d’Aubignac, but it remains an indisputable part of his theoretical framework. By contrast, bienséances are not given the same prominence. In fact, he never uses the term bienséances (in the plural), and makes very little use of the singular form. It is true that the first discourse includes a sustained discussion of Aristotle’s four qualities of character, but without any reference to bienséances (in the singular or the plural) (Œuvres complètes III, 129-34). He uses “la bienséance” once in a general definitional context, defining “le vraisemblable” as “une chose manifestement possible dans la bienséance, et qui n’est ni manifestement vraie ni manifestement fausse” (p. 166). Bienséance seems here to have a poetic sense similar to the one attached to it by Chapelain. It is this same poetic sense that prevails in the other rare occurrences of it in the Discours, most often connected to a discussion of Le Cid. In the first discourse he deals with the changed ending of the play. Having diluted references to a marriage between Rodrigue and Chimène in order to respond to the charge that Chimène’s ready assent to a marriage flouts “la bienséance”, Corneille then faced d’Aubignac’s rather different criticism that he has failed to make clear to the audience what happens to the characters at the end of the play.20 Corneille’s comments in the first discourse are, in effect, a response to d’Aubignac, and one of which Chapelain would have approved: “Bien [que Rodrigue] ait de l’amour, il n’est point besoin qu’il parle d’épouser sa maîtresse quand la bienséance ne le permet pas, et il suffit d’en donner l’idée après en avoir levé tous les empêchements, sans lui en faire déterminer le jour. Ce serait une chose insupportable que Chimène en convînt avec Rodrigue dès le lendemain qu’il a tué son père, et Rodrigue serait ridicule, s’il faisait la moindre démonstration de le désirer” (p. 126, my italics). Corneille is showing here that he has taken on board Chapelain’s criticisms: it would be jarringly out of character for Rodrigue to talk of marriage and Chimène to agree to it so soon. The “Examen” of the play measures the distance that both he and the theatre have travelled between 1637 and 1660. The play was successful in its time, he says, but it would not be successful in 1660 without the ameliorating measures he has taken: “Pour ne pas contredire l’Histoire, j’ai cru ne me pouvoir dispenser d’en jeter quelque idée, mais avec incertitude de l’effet, et ce n’était par là que je pouvais accorder la bienséance du Théâtre avec la vérité de l’événement” (Œuvres complètes I, 701-02). “La bienséance du théâtre” is the same poetic concept as Chapelain’s. Spectator credibility would be too strained if Chimène readily assented to marry her father’s murderer straight away; so even though the marriage is historically true, Corneille agrees that consistent characterization has come to be impor-

20 “L’une des plus grandes fautes qu’on ait remarquées dans le Cid, est que la Pièce n’est pas finie” (Pratique, p. 207).
tant for the theatrical effect and that modification of the truth is therefore called for.

Conclusions

What this account of the term *bienséance* in writings of the mid-seventeenth century reveals is that for Chapelain and Corneille it was strictly concerned with the plausible and consistent presentation of character. Both use the term (only in the singular) in a technical, non-moral sense. La Mesnardière, on the other hand, tends to use the singular term when he is making judgements based on conventional morality and the plural in a technical sense. Curiously he does not use it in his chapter on “les moeurs”, only in his chapter on “les sentiments”, though his use of it is connected to Chapelain’s since it is very much about dramatic personages speaking consistently “in character”. Occasionally La Mesnardière’s use of the term might be thought to shade from aesthetic into moral judgement. But none of these writers uses the term *bienséances* as a straightforward prohibitive concept. And, crucially, none of them uses it in connection with any discussion of violence on stage.21

But from these tentative developments of a poetic concept, centrally concerned with the structure of the fiction, we return to Scherer’s personification of the *bienséances* as an unremittingly exigent beast, always censoring, excluding and striking fear. Scherer’s text offers numerous instances. A few will suffice: “On voit qu’un abîme, creusé par les bienséances, sépare de tous ces textes [pré-classiques] la tragédie classique, qui n’osera mentionner l’habillement, la toilette, le sommeil ou la nourriture que par de nobles et prudentes périphrases” (p. 390); “Dans les relations sentimentales normales entre jeunes héros, les bienséances retrouvent leur force, ou du moins cherchent à l’affirmer” (p. 396); “Encore que l’idée des bienséances soit alléguee à partir de 1630 environ, elle n’est pas assez forte à ses débuts, pour lutter toujours avec succès contre le goût du sang et des cadavres” (p. 415); “Le meurtre, même lorsqu’il n’est pas sanguinaire à l’excès, est proscrit par les bienséances à partir des dernières années du règne de Louis XIII” (p. 417). These claims, and others, in Scherer’s account of the

21 Christopher Gossip is therefore right to claim that “the proprieties (les bienséances) are not discussed in great detail in seventeenth-century France”, though the reason he gives is wrong and suggests a conventional misunderstanding of the term (“perhaps because they concern not what should be included but rather what should be left out of tragedy”). See his *An Introduction to French Classical Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 144.
bienséances are based on terminological misrepresentation, caused by a retrospective reconstruction of a concept. He attaches to the term bien-séances an importance and range of resonances that for writers in the mid-seventeenth century it simply did not have. Yet his eloquent and picturesque views of the bienséances remain influential. Hénin’s recent article on bloodying the stage is a sensitive account of a wide range of early modern texts that address the issue, but she retains Scherer’s terminology and approach to the bienséances: “Le refus des spectacles violents [...] est le symptôme le plus évident du triomphe des bienséances”.

If we read the theoretical writings of the period 1630 to 1660 – Chapelain, La Mesnardière, d’Aubignac and Corneille – we have a quite different sense of the meaning and importance of the terms bienséance and bienséances from those we might derive from reading Bray, Scherer and their successors. For the writers of the mid-seventeenth century the terms had nothing to do with the depiction of violence on stage. When either Corneille or his spectators contemplated the murder of Camille as something potentially visible on stage, none of them can have thought that the fact of its visibility had anything to do with bienséances. It was, at the time, a term of no relevance to the topic. And we shall need to look to other factors that might explain Corneille’s ill-ease with the murder of Camille. The search requires an exploration of the single occurrence of the term bienséance being used in the period in connection with the ending of Horace, and that is by d’Aubignac in the Pratique du théâtre (pp. 113-14). But d’Aubignac’s use of the term has more to do with Horace than with Camille, and it is not at all to do with the visibility of violence on stage. Sensitivity to d’Aubignac’s use of the term can lead us to appreciate all the more the complexity and subtlety of Corneille’s argumentation in the “Examen”.

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23 On this, see my “The Death of Camille in Corneille’s Horace”. I am grateful to Emma Herdman and David Maskell for their comments on a draft of this article.