

**SPATIAL RECONFIGURATIONS OF POWER:
FROM SHAKESPEARE'S *THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR* TO
VERDI'S *FALSTAFF* STAGED BY THE METROPOLITAN OPERA,
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Abstract: This article focuses on the peculiar setting – the kitchen – chosen for the revenge scene in Giuseppe Verdi's *Falstaff* (Act II, scene 2) by director Robert Carsen for his production at the Metropolitan Opera, New York (2013). I examine side by side Arrigo Boito's libretto and the corresponding scenes in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in order to highlight the textual clues that may support Carsen's choice. Against the background provided by a brief historicisation of the emergence of the modern kitchen and its association (originally) with bourgeois women, I discuss Carsen's revenge scene, by recourse to gender theory, as a masquerade of femininity, i.e., a mockingly exaggerated performance of gender.

Keywords: Falstaff (Verdi and Boito), gender, kitchen, masquerade of femininity, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Shakespeare), Robert Carsen

1. Introduction

In Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (henceforth *MWW*), a gluttonous squire past his prime, Sir John Falstaff, fancies two married women of Windsor, to whom he writes – simultaneously – love letters, for he thinks himself – or rather thinks that *they* find his pot belly – irresistible (*MWW* I.3.57-61, I.3.64-6, II.2.96-100). (Actually, through the women, Falstaff aims at their husbands' purse, as he confesses to his followers, Pistol and Nym (I.3.51-52, I.3.67-70), and later to Ford himself, disguised as Master Brook (II.2.250-254).) The two bourgeois women think otherwise, though (II.1.1-3, 18-19, II.1.49-50, 57-58). Insulted by his presumption as well as dishonesty – for they discover the CC-ed love letter (II.1.61-70; II.1.73-75) – Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, aided by Mistress Quickly (the servant of the French physician, Dr Caius), promise to revenge themselves:

MISTRESS PAGE [to herself]. How shall I be revenged on him? for revenged I will be! – as sure as his guts are made of puddings. (*MWW* II.1.25-27)

MISTRESS FORD [to MISTRESS PAGE]. How shall I be revenged on him? I think the best way were to entertain him with hope, till the wicked fire of lust have melted him in his own grease... (II.1.59-61)

MISTRESS PAGE [to MISTRESS FORD]. Let's be revenged on him. (II.1.85)

Dismayed by her husband's jealousy, Mistress Ford does not shy away from making a fool of Master Ford either:

MISTRESS PAGE. Is there not a double excellency in this?

MISTRESS FORD. I know not which pleases me better, that my husband is deceived, or Sir John. (*MWW* III.3.168-170)

Shakespeare's comedy features in comic key, if anything, a gender clash generated by men who vent unabashedly, through either jealousy or lechery, their patriarchal conviction that they enjoy proprietorial rights over women. The women will therefore make fools of such foolish men (*MWW* IV.2.32-34): what the "merry wives" devise relative to Falstaff in Act V literally makes a spectacle of men's horny ego.

In 1889, a nearly octogenarian Giuseppe Verdi and life-long admirer of the Bard accepted to compose an opera to a libretto based on *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, as suggested by his librettist and fellow composer Arrigo Boito (Hutcheon and Hutcheon 2015: 29-30; Della Seta 2004: 83-84). *Falstaff* world premiered at the Teatro alla Scala, in Milan, on 9 February 1893; it premiered in London and Paris in 1894 and in New York in 1895, yet its success at the Metropolitan Opera came only with Franco Zeffirelli's Met debut in 1964.

It is no novelty that Verdi's *commedia lirica* adapts characters and incidents not only from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (performed prob. 1597), but also from *Henry IV, Part One* (performed prob. 1596) and *Henry IV, Part Two* (written prob. 1596-97). Boito borrows from Shakespeare's chronicle plays the dissoluteness of Sir John and his larger-than-life character (and great girth). What concerns me here, however, is neither Verdi's opera qua opera nor Boito's adaptation of Shakespeare for the opera stage (Della Seta 2004: 84-85; see also Wills 2011: 165-172), but its new production at the Metropolitan Opera by Canadian director Robert Carsen. Carsen's *Falstaff* at the Met is actually a co-production with the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, where it premiered in 2012, the Teatro alla Scala, Milan, 2013, De Nederlandse Opera, Amsterdam, 2014, and the Canadian Opera Company, Toronto, 2014. Carsen's is the first new Met production of *Falstaff* since Zeffirelli's.

In Carsen's *Falstaff* (which opened at the Met on 6 December 2013, conducted by James Levine), Verdi's *commedia lirica* is set in the late 1950s. Removed from Shakespeare's/Boito's Henrician times to a not so distant past (for the contemporary opera-lovers), "when England was coming out of its post-war depression" (Carsen, in "*Falstaff* 2013-14 New Production Preview", [online]), *Falstaff* shows the rigid distinctions between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie fading away (Freilich 2013). This paper examines the directorial choice for Verdi's Act II, scene 2, set in Alice Ford's "obnoxiously beautiful" (Salazar 2019), "garish Formica kitchen" (Davidson 2013) designed by Paul Steinberg. Nothing in either Shakespeare or Boito directly invites Carsen's choice, save Boito's cooking verbs used first by the women (Act I, scene 2) and then by Falstaff (Act II, scene 2) to describe his (respectively envisaged and lived) torment.

2. The texts

Let us first parse the texts which prompted Robert Carsen to choose the kitchen as the setting for Act II, scene 2, where Falstaff is seeing Alice Ford in the

hope of having sex with her. He will be pulled a prank on by Alice and her acolytes – Meg Page and Mrs Quickly, and only marginally Nannetta (Mrs Ford’s daughter in Boito, but Anne Page in Shakespeare) – by way of revenge. In Shakespeare, the action of both Act III, scene 3 and Act IV, scene 2 (with its ludic revenge ‘encore’) is set indoors, in “[t]he hall of Master Ford’s house” (*MWW* III.3 stage direction, IV.2 stage direction). Boito adapts from Shakespeare exclusively the episode featured in Act III; its setting – according to the opening stage direction – is virtually identical to Shakespeare’s: “una sala nella casa di Ford” (Verdi 2009: 760).

Trapped in the Ford house, Falstaff can only escape the jealous husband by consenting that Alice and the other ladies hide him in the laundry basket (covered up with the Fords’ dirty linen), ordered – unbeknownst to Falstaff – to be emptied into the Thames. Here are Shakespeare’s Mrs Ford’s instructions to her servants:

MISTRESS FORD: Marry, as I told you before, John and Robert, be ready here hard by in the brew-house, and *when I suddenly call you, come forth, and – without any pause or staggering – take this basket on your shoulders: that done, trudge with it in all haste, and carry it among the whitsters in Datchet-mead, and there empty it in the muddy ditch, close by the Thames [sic] side.* (*MWW* III.3.8-14)

When the time comes, the servants take the basket away, ignorant of its contents, thereby also fooling Ford (*MWW* III.3.137-150), who loses the wager on the well-foundedness of his jealousy. *Falstaff’s* Act II, scene 2 follows Shakespeare’s Act III, scene 3 fairly accurately. The servants having dumped the basket contents out of the window in the Thames, the four women laugh triumphantly and reveal their prank to Ford (Verdi 2009: 768).

In Shakespeare’s Act IV, scene 2, which Boito ignores, Falstaff consents – implicitly – to further face-losing through cross-dressing as the bulky aunt of one of the maids, lest he risk facing a doubly angry Ford (*MWW* IV.2.58-86). (Unsurprisingly, the disguise ploy proposed by Mrs Ford reveals the women’s revenge-lust (see also III.3.181-189).) Cross-dressing was unavoidable in an age – such as Shakespeare’s – of all-male casts; his texts further play on this when (usually) female characters must disguise themselves. Even so, Shakespeare’s contemporaries must have roared with laughter to see *MWW’s* two women – albeit crossed-dressed male actors – script-directing Falstaff to disguise himself as a loathsome old auntie, unwelcome to the Fords’ house, whose ‘trespassing’ unleashes Ford’s violent anger. How would cross-dressing have impressed the audience in the late 1880s-early 1890s, all the more so as Falstaff/the ‘witch’ gets a sound beating too? In opera, cross-dressing typically concerns trouser roles for sopranos (e.g. Cherubino in Mozart’s *Le Nozze di Figaro*), mezzo-sopranos (e.g. Nero in Handel’s *Agrippina*, Siébel in Gounod’s *Faust*, Nicklausse – the Muse’s trouser role – in Offenbach’s *Les Contes d’Hoffmann*, Hansel in Engelbert Humperdinck’s *Hänsel und Gretel*, and Octavian – soprano or mezzo-soprano – in Richard Strauss’s *Der Rosenkavalier*) and contraltos (e.g. Orpheus in Gluck’s *Orpheus and Eurydice*). (Interestingly, though, the Met’s English-language production of *Hänsel and Gretel* directed by Richard Jones, originally created for the Welsh National Opera and the Lyric Opera of Chicago, cast a tenor in the mezzo-soprano Witch role.)

My observations, alongside strictures specific to the genre’s performance, may conceivably suggest why Boito did not also adapt Shakespeare’s vengeance

scene in Act IV. They cannot, however, nor are they meant to, explain why neither Shakespeare nor Boito, unlike Robert Carsen, *chose* the *kitchen* as the setting for the vengeance scene. Carsen's kitchen in *Falstaff*, I submit, furnishes a taken-for-granted place for the women to avenge their hurt pride by humiliating Falstaff along gender lines and turning him into *dirty linen* in literal, not just metaphorical, terms.

At this juncture, looking at Boito's *cooking vocabulary* – in-existent in Shakespeare – in the revenge exchanges may be instructive. Kitchen-related imagery first appears in Act I, scene 2, when the women plan their revenge on Falstaff:

MRS. FORD (to DAME QUICKLY): Seek thou the ruffian at his inn, and offer to arrange a private appointment with me.
 QUICKLY: Excellent notion!
 ANNE: Cunning contrivance!
 MRS. FORD: Thus and thus only, to our snare we may entice him.
 ANNE: And then...
 MRS. FORD: And then a pretty trick we'll play him!
 QUICKLY: Without the least compunction.
 ANNE: The monster!
 MRS. PAGE: The impudent old rascal!
 MRS. FORD: *The mountain of tallow* [*È un monte di lardo*]!
 MRS. PAGE: He merits no compassion –
 MRS. FORD: He's a glutton who squanders all that he has in gorging.
 ANNE: We'll *souse* him in the river.
 MRS. FORD: *We'll roast him at a fire.* [*Lo arrostitremo al fuoco.*]
 ALL: Delightful, enchanting!
 MRS. PAGE (to DAME QUICKLY): We count on you to play your part full feately. (Verdi and Boito 1893:n.p., Verdi 2009:755; Beatty Kingston prefers Shakespeare's 'Anne' to Boito's 'Nannetta')

The modern translation used by the Metropolitan Opera in the English subtitles (translator not mentioned) relishes in verbs of cooking:

NANNETTA: We'll toss him in the river.
 ALICE: And *roast him on a spit*.
 ALL: *We'll boil him and toast him, we'll simmer and roast him!*
 (The Met: Live in HD: *Falstaff* by Giuseppe Verdi 00:28:11-00:32:03)

Here is how Falstaff describes his suffering from excessive heat, hidden as he is in the laundry basket, in Boito's Act II, scene 2, in the ensemble part:

FALSTAFF (*sbucando colla faccia*): *Affogo* [*I'm stifling / I'm poached*]!
 QUICKLY (*ricacciandolo giù*): Sta sotto.
 MEG: Or questi s'insorge. . . .
 QUICKLY (*abbassandosi e parlando a Falstaff sulla cesta*): Se l'altro ti scorge sei morto.
 FALSTAFF (*rispondendo sotto la biancheria*): *Son cotto* [*I'm cooked*]!
 MEG: Sta sotto!
 FALSTAFF (*sbucando*): *Che caldo* [*How hot it is*]!
 QUICKLY: Sta sotto!
 FALSTAFF: *Mi squaglio* [*I'm melting*]!
 QUICKLY: Sta sotto! . . .

MEG: Il ribaldo vorrebbe un ventaglio.
 FALSTAFF (*supplicante, col naso fuori*): Un breve spiraglio [*A small chink / a narrow opening*]
 Non chiedo di più [*I'm not asking for more*].
 QUICKLY: Ti metto il bavaglio
 Se parli [*I'll gag you if you talk*].
 MEG (*ricacciandolo sotto la biancheria*): Giù!
 QUICKLY (*come sopra*): Giù! (Verdi 2009:766; my trans. in square brackets)

FALSTAFF (*thrusting out his face*): *I'm stifling!*
 QUICKLY (*pushing him down*): Lie quiet, lie quiet!
 MRS. PAGE: Be careful, they're prying! . . .
 FALSTAFF: *I'm frying!*
 QUICKLY and MRS. PAGE (*together*): Keep under! Lie quiet!
 FALSTAFF: *I'm stewing! I'm melting [Mi squaglio]!* Alack, I shall die if I may not take breath!
 QUICKLY: Keep under, keep under! Unless you keep quiet you're doomed to death! (*covers Falstaff up with the dirty linen*)
 MRS. PAGE (*ironically*): Strange, that nobody offers to fan him!
 MRS. PAGE: Be quiet! To laugh were to make them suspect us:
 Unless we are careful they'll surely detect us.
 A husband who's jealous,
 A swain over-zealous. (Verdi and Boito 1893:n.p.)

The Met's English subtitles render the Falstaff–Quickly–Meg dialogue (here only a part thereof) thus:

FALSTAFF: *I'm roasting.*
 QUICKLY: Stay down...
 FALSTAFF: *I'm boiling.*
 MEG: ... or *you're cooked!*
 FALSTAFF: Oh, the heat, *I'm roasting!* (01:13:22-01:14:15)

Unsurprisingly, in Act III, scene 1 Boito's Falstaff complains to Dame Quickly, in culinary terms, about the ill-treatment he received in the Ford house:

FALSTAFF: Con quel tufo! – E quel caldo! – Un uom della mia temprà,
 Che in uno stillicidio continuo si distempra!
 Poi, quando *fui ben cotto* [*cooked*], *rovente* [*red-hot/burning*], *incandescente* [*incandescent*],
 M'han tuffato nell'acqua. [...] (Verdi 2009:770; my trans. in square brackets)

FALSTAFF: What a ferment? [*sic*] What a smelting!
 A man of my complexion
 As *butter prone to melting*,
 A chronic *liquefaction!*
 When *I was hotly stewing and seething* and fiercely glowing, in the river they plunged me! (Verdi and Boito 1893: n.p.)

The Met subtitles read:

FALSTAFF: . . . With dirty linen . . . in that heat!
 A man like me, *melting like butter.*
 And once *I was toasted, basted and roasted* . . . (01:24:42-01:25:56)

In the Met subtitles, Falstaff's "butter" simile invokes the image of *basting*, viz., "pour[ing] liquid or melted fat over food that is cooking", especially over meat in order to keep it moist (*LDOCE* Online, "baste"), with himself as both melted butter and roasting meat. Arguably, Boito's imagery may be building on Shakespeare's women's description of Sir John when they contemplate revenge: for Mistress Page, Falstaff is a "greasy knight" (*MWW* II.1.97-98), with guts made of *puddings* (II.1.27); for Mistress Ford, he is a *whale* thrown ashore at Windsor (II.1.57), whom "the wicked fire of lust" (II.1.60) will conceivably "*melt[] . . . in his own grease*" (II.1.61).

Yet, apart from Shakespeare's 'grease' imagery for Falstaff and Boito's cooking vocabulary, why should Carsen have preferred the 'kitchen' to a 'room' ("the hall" / "una sala") in the Fords' bourgeois house? Had the kitchen, by the late 1950s, when Carsen sets his *Falstaff*, become the earmark of femininity, or at least of that femininity associated with Shakespeare's "merry wives"?

3. The kitchen and the performance of femininity

Nowadays "[t]he *idea* of the kitchen exerts a powerful hold on the English imagination, evoking images and thoughts of hearth and home, family and domesticity" (Freeman 2004: 1, original emphasis). This perception might explain Carsen's choice, I suggest, in terms of an *ideological ready-made* not only for the anglophone world, but perhaps for the Global North. Furthermore, "the kitchen is a repository where consumption practices..., politics, culture, religion, familial and social relations intersect in a most taken-for-granted way" (Sciocluna 2017: 58). Indeed, Carsen's *Falstaff's* kitchen is a place of *sociality* (see Meah 2014: 671) in various realisations, some more tense than others, and of sociality-related *consumption practices* (see Meah 2016), but especially an arena for contestation of familial and social relations. For instance, the friends meet in the kitchen: the Ford house topography has the kitchen as the second best (back) entrance, in good English tradition. As Alice is stirring something creamy in a large bowl (much later taken up by Mrs Quickly), her friend Meg pours white wine into the glasses; soon, Mrs Quickly also joins them for a little gossip and a sip, which leads to concocting the revenge plan against Falstaff. Nannetta joins them to bemoan her father's decision to marry her off to Dr Caius. *Bulky* Falstaff himself – in a red riding suit (to echo, ironically, the *Little Red Riding Hood* soon *to be wolfed down* by the wolf?) – enters the kitchen, looking for Alice, unaware of the trap set for him. Now alone, she is lighting the candles on the round table where they will dine – actually, where Falstaff will devour a sizeable leg from the roast turkey *he* has removed from the oven. Falstaff has no qualms about the rendezvous locale, but rather contemplates the prospect of having sex with Alice, whom he gently pushes onto the island worktop. (I have been unable to verify in archives whether having sex on the kitchen table was an at least occasional pastime in the late 1950s! However, forced sex on the kitchen table in the late 1950s can be documented, e.g. homosexual child rape ("William Frank's Story", online). Yet, postwar marriage handbooks advising women routinely associated sex and cooking (Neuhaus 2001: 107-111).) Too bad Mrs Quickly enters (as instructed) to warn that Ford is coming home to storm the house for Falstaff! Soon enough, a Valkyries' ride is unleashed by mad Ford and the entire township, unsuccessfully hunting down Falstaff, who is safely, if chokingly, hidden in the laundry basket.

In Carsen's production, the women busying themselves in the kitchen, once Ford is in, do not simply *perform their gender* (Butler 1999: 141-180) – here *cooking and tidying* – in compliance with patriarchal expectations and Boito's libretto. Rather, they *overdo* it deliberately and mockingly by *masquerading* femininity neither in sexual terms (Irigaray 1985: 27, 62), nor through verbal mimicry (*mimétisme*), viz., “playing with mimesis” (idem: 76-77) through “miming/reproducing a language that is not own, masculine language” (idem: 137), but by caricaturing gender-role expectations (idem: 152) and thus gender identity (cf. Tseëlon 2001: 2-3). Mrs Quickly and Meg *feign* stirring in the bowl and cooking, which affords them a veneer of acceptable/respectable companionship and sociality, when Ford and his ‘militia’ barge into the kitchen, or even the respite to spy on Ford. Later, Mrs Quickly and Meg enjoin each other by turns to feign tidying up the kitchen stormed by Ford, in accordance with the libretto: “Facciamo le viste / D’attendere ai panni” (“Let’s make it look like we’re tending to the clothes”; my trans.). The theatricality of Carsen’s scene surpasses Boito’s:

QUICKLY (*accanto alla cesta, a MEG*): Facciamo le viste

D’attendere ai panni;
Pur ch’ei non c’inganni
Con mosse impreviste.
Finor non s’accorse
Di nulla; egli può
Sorprenderci forse,
Confonderci no.

MEG (*accanto alla cesta, a QUICKLY*): Facciamogli siepe

Fra tanto scompiglio.
Ne’giuochi il periglio
E’un grano di pepe.
Il rischio é un diletto
Che accresce l’ardor.
Che stimola in petto
Gli spirti e il cor. (Verdi 2009: 766)

QUICKLY: Now let us be busy, the linen arranging,

And give him a chance his position of changing.

MRS. PAGE: Let’s pile the clothes on him, and thoroughly hide him,

Lest some irretrievable ill should betide him!

QUICKLY: Till now his suspicions have led him astray.

Defeat us he shall not, though vex us he may!

MRS. PAGE: The risk of a jest is the liveliest part,

It raises the spirits and gladdens the heart! (Verdi and Boito 1893:n.p.)

The two women’s is a *boisterously contrived spectacle of expectable – and respectable – femininity*, not the ‘experience’ of everyday femininity qua domestic drudgery (They are *merry wives* indeed!). Where best to *stage* this *masquerade of female domesticity* – intended to deceive men – than in *the kitchen* for credibility’s sake? (However, offstage such masquerade may easily backfire and show women prone to mischief every time they perform their gender ‘correctly’).

An overview of the historical fortunes of the kitchen, its *en-gendering* (de Lauretis 1987: 38) – i.e., gender-related creation – as women’s province, may provide the background against which to gauge Carsen’s setting choice. A caveat: both the originators of Falstaff (the character) – Shakespeare, as well as the two

nineteenth-century composers – and the Met production’s cast render *Falstaff* (the opera) a bourgeois, white-race affair by default, if with a jarring difference from offstage life. In the latter, white middle-class women in the Global North have felt – or have been theorised as implicitly feeling – oppressed and captive in the kitchen (Meah 2014: 674-676; Scicluna 2017: 55-56, chaps. 3, 5-8). (By contrast, both for lower-class non-white women in the Global South and for minority and immigrant women in the Global North, the kitchen is their realm of empowerment and creativity in juggling everyday life’s hardships (Meah 2014: 676-679) – or of struggling with squalor (Bowen et al. 2014).) Furthermore, with men’s recent growing involvement in the kitchen in the Global North, women appear to perceive their power and expertise – in their one and only realm – threatened as *occasional* male involvement qua fun and competitiveness elbows *routine* female drudgery aside (Meah 2014: 681-684).

Yet, how did the kitchen become associated with women, as their indisputable domain, (nearly) irrespective of class? Elite eighteenth- and nineteenth-century households prior to the Industrial Revolution relegated the kitchen – and the domestic servants staffing it – to a doubly invisible position: the kitchen out of sight, in basements or at the back of houses, and both kitchen and domestic activities out of mind, clearly demarcated from “the polite parts of the house” (Eveleigh, qtd. in Scicluna 2017: 61) – but for the odours emanating from the kitchen into the house. Conversely, in both urban and rural lower-class households, the kitchen could often be “the only living space available” (ibid.). With the Industrial Revolution, whose pollution affected the urban environment in unprecedented ways, ideas of comfort – viz., the house as haven – started to permeate the middle-class imaginary of ‘home’. Yet, as “the idea of domesticity as a general good became associated with the physical home as a symbol of rest and love”, the figure of the woman emerged as the default protectress of this home (Scicluna 2017: 62), due to her segregation at home, away from any sort of physical but especially moral pollution in the public sphere. The outcome of industrial-revolution-rooted capitalism, with its clear-cut separation of the public and private spheres, was the making of the housewife, first “as an ideal of the bourgeois classes” and during the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries as “the dominant female model” (Lutz 2007: 187; see Bock and Duden 1977). The ‘angel in the house’, moreover, became associated with an idea of cleanliness that reflected on the kitchen in physical terms of hygiene, yet also, metaphorically, on hierarchical class construal within and without the home (Scicluna 2017: 63-64). Industrial, socio-political and ideological developments led to the turn-of-the-century dwindling numbers of male domestics and after WWI also female domestics, with a time lag en-gendered by the stereotyped association of (lower-class) women with the home and with caring and nurturing activities (idem: 64-65).

Modernity-driven attempts at rationalisation of housework in the nineteenth century successfully imposed a new time awareness – and timing – of household activities, as well as the spatial specialisation of functions first in upper- and middle-class households and gradually in most others (idem: 66-67). Early twentieth-century attempts to render the kitchen more scientific, in the spirit of modernity, “culminated in the idea of the kitchen as a workshop” powered by Taylorism (viz., the capitalist principle of *efficiency*) and often associated with the woman (idem: 67). The most impactful Taylorist kitchen was the Frankfurt kitchen (or continuous kitchen) designed by Austrian architect Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky in 1926 for working-class families, yet unaffordable to them (Freeman 2004: 39-

41). It “emulated the assembly line of the modern factory” (Scicluna 2017: 69) in both shape – a galley kitchen in its original design – and size-cum-purpose: this tiny kitchen was designed to “only accommodate one person at a time” – the working-class woman – for cooking purposes, thus excluding “communality” (idem: 70). Those who could afford this (soon to be called) fitted kitchen, the middle classes, didn’t embrace it from the outset, but needed the preliminary stage of “the Commodious Cupboard” (Freeman 2004: 42), viz., “individually crafted, free-standing kitchen cupboards suitably divided to accommodate an array of food and a variety of household tools and utensils” (idem: 43). By contrast, in the US, H. Creston Dohner’s “Day After Tomorrow’s Kitchen”, commissioned by the Libbey-Owens Ford Company in 1943, successfully persuaded the public about “the desirability of kitchen efficiency on which the fitted kitchen was premised” (idem: 45). The 1950s’ economic boom – and wealth surge – allowed more and more Americans to purchase fitted kitchens such as Dohner’s; by the 1960s, British houses had also introduced fitted kitchens (idem: 26).

With the emergence of gas for cooking, hence an availability of multiple heat sources in the house, both the design of British homes and overall domestic activity underwent radical change; a sharper spatial separation of activities ‘removed’ the kitchen from the centre of family life, despite resistance to the latter (Freeman 2004: 37). Variations in kitchen design evolved accordingly: in the 1940s, the kitchen-living room arrangement with a low-partition wall enabled families to eat away from the kitchen without thereby being fully separated from the housewife busy in the kitchen; after World War II, the kitchen-diner graced many of the new houses (idem: 37-38, 44-49).

Furthermore, the overall improvement in housing conditions in post-war Britain, despite widespread poverty (Roberts 1995: chap. 2), went in tandem with “the increasing use of domestic appliances, which also influenced [gender-specific] housework routines” (Scicluna 2017: 71). With the removal of Purchase Tax in 1957, Britain witnessed greater affordability of kitchen utensils and white goods, regarded “as necessities and not luxuries since they were used daily in every home” (idem: 73).

Yet, the interwar period also witnessed a *middle-class house reinvention*, which rendered the *kitchen* the *hub of conviviality* with family and friends too (Moran 2007: 106-107), the very opposite of the Frankfurt kitchen, allegedly designed for the working classes. With the gentrification of London (1955-1980), for instance, the “new middle classes” would “have ‘a few friends round for a meal’” eaten “unceremoniously in a knocked-through kitchen-diner” rather than for a “formal dinner party with several courses” in “a ‘stuffy’ separate dining room” (idem: 107). (Carsen’s Falstaff in the kitchen was round the corner.)

Modernity’s house once assimilated to an efficient machine, its ‘general manager’, originally the middle-class housewife, became the protagonist of the social *myth* “that home was the only place to fulfil oneself” (Turnaturi, qtd. in Scicluna 2017: 68), presumably as an efficient, if unpaid, worker. Ironically, the patriarchal mantra “a woman’s place is in the kitchen” does not come from time immemorial, as many perhaps assume implicitly. Nor is the kitchen as women’s ‘empire’ an *indisputable* site of feminine dis/empowerment: women have “appropriate[d] kitchens for a range of purposes, including remaking and subverting gendered roles and resisting gendered discourses” (Meah 2014: 675). Indeed, the kitchen as an “ideological battleground” (Meah 2016: section I) does beg for attention.

4. Conclusion

“[I]ncreasingly represented as a place of sociality” (Meah 2014: 671), the *modern* kitchen can convincingly provide the background to the events of Act II, scene 2 in *Falstaff*. Not only do Carsen’s women meet in Alice’s kitchen; they sip wine, chatter, cook, and plan their revenge on Falstaff, as casually – or ‘naturally’ – as if they were meeting to eat in Alice’s drawing room or, as in Act I, scene 2 in Carsen’s production, in the classy dining room of the Garter Inn. Unsurprisingly, Carsen’s Falstaff enters the house through – and remains in – the kitchen, until dumped in the river.

Yet there is more to Carsen’s setting. Whether by design or inadvertently, it suggests, I contend, that the modern kitchen is an – perhaps the – unacknowledged *lieu de mémoire* in the everyday *performance* of the *collective memory of patriarchy* per se. As the kitchen em(-)places gender hierarchy, gender roles and female dis-/self-empowerment through daily routine, it en-genders a subtype of collective memory – subsumable to the woman’s-place-is-in-the-kitchen cliché – never theorised as such, for ‘collective memory’ is itself a patriarchal construct.

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