Displays of the Everyday. Relations between gender and the visibility of domestic work in the modern Finnish kitchen from the 1930s to the 1950s

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ABSTRACT This article discusses relations and interaction between gender and spatial arrangements of kitchens in the modern Finnish home from the 1930s to the 1950s. The focus is on the gendered and gendering aspects of habitation: the interrelationship between planning ideals and the lived space of the modern kitchen. Modernisation of homes was concentrated on the kitchen, an area that was turned into a small, efficient and rational workstation for one person, namely the active, professional housewife. While during the 1930s the goal was to separate kitchen work, defined as unhygienic, strictly off into its own space, during the 1950s the spatial continuum between kitchen, dining corner and living room became central. The kitchen was no longer an enclosed space, but was now integrated into the family rooms of the home. This ‘making visible’ of the work of housewife signified a radical change in terms of domestic labour, which now received a visible position in the home. However, it also signified that housework was to be purified and its material traces associated with femininity reduced. Kitchens, with their dazzling white surfaces, were generally depicted as having been cleansed of feminine fripperies and decoration. Instead of the denial of femininity, I would claim that this cleansing could be understood as its redefinition.

Introduction
‘A well-organized kitchen is like a small laboratory. It saves labour and through that gives more leisure time to use according to one’s own wishes, and it gives the pleasure of work. A rationalized laboratory kitchen is not the caprice of fashion, but the demand of the era’, wrote Finnish architect Salme Setälä in her book Kettiön sisustus [Furnishing the Kitchen] in 1931 (pp. 13–14)¹. The book concentrated on the rational and efficient organisation of kitchen space in modern urban apartments. It elaborated on international, mainly German and Swedish, ideas of hygienic kitchen design and was geared towards the new, modern generation of women, both as active housewives and as self-supporting, independent women.
In this article, I explore the emergence of the modern Finnish kitchen from the 1930s to the 1950s. The kitchen is approached as a gendered and gendering space that in turn shapes and reshapes gender and the meanings attached to it on multiple levels, ranging from its spatial arrangement to social practices and the lived experiences of habitation (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 36; Certeau, 1980, p. 173; Young, 1997, pp. 149–159). Although my focus is on the intertwined transformations of kitchen space and gender, these transformations cannot be distinguished entirely from changes in the dwelling space as a whole, for they are intimately related. My analysis is based on architectural material (new buildings and their plans), the wider discourse on housing in architectural and domestic magazines and home decoration manuals, iconographic material, including photographs, and memories of those living in the new suburbs around Helsinki in the 1950s.

The spatial arrangement of the Finnish home was revolutionised during the period from the 1930s to the 1950s. The Functionalist dwelling, consisting of separate kitchen, living room, bedroom(s), toilet and bathroom rapidly became the obvious and virtually the unchallenged model for a family dwelling, no matter the social class, in city and country alike. It replaced the earlier, socially differentiated spectrum in housing, in which the size of the dwelling, its spatial organisation and how household members lived together varied, depending on social class and residential area. The transformation of dwellings was connected with deep changes in Finnish society. During the twentieth century, Finland was transformed from a poor agricultural country into a wealthy, urbanised and industrialised nation (Saarikangas, 1993, p. 54). Today the vast majority of Finnish buildings are predominantly modern in appearance: almost 90% date from 1920 or later, and 70% were built after 1945.

The dwelling increased in importance as an instrument for organising everyday life, particularly the lives of mothers and children. To dwellings was linked a concern for the very smallest details of everyday lives, turning the private realm of the home into a very public matter. Notions of hygiene and cleanliness, along with ideas about the influence of the immediate environment, occupied a central place in Finnish architectural discourse from the 1930s onwards and governed the social reform of housing (Saarikangas, 1999, pp. 186–188; see also Heller, 1979). Inside the dwelling, concern for hygiene meant increasing spatial differentiation: household work, social life and sleeping were each allocated their own space. Furthermore, attention was paid to rooms that previously had received little architectural attention: the kitchen, bedroom, nursery, bathroom, toilet and balcony. The kitchen in particular underwent drastic change.

The focus of this article is the juxtaposition of the small, spatially demarcated laboratory–kitchen, the model for organising housework during the 1930s, with the larger and visually more open kitchen that emerged after the Second World War. Although the differences were seemingly small and both types of kitchens were designed within the framework of modern architectural principles, the changes were nevertheless significant and resulted in substantial transformations in daily living. While the kitchen of the 1930s was a demarcated workstation for one person—the intelligent housewife—the spatially open kitchen of the 1950s was integrated into the family space of the home. Open space brought household work into family rooms and connected different aspects of domestic life. However, it set an even higher standard for the appearance and cleanliness of the kitchen.
It can be argued that the intertwined notions of gender, class, nation and cleanliness were constantly renegotiated and redefined in the kitchen. By focusing on relationships between users and the spatial organisation of the kitchen, I will discuss how the spatial arrangement of the kitchen regulated the use of space, affected the movements of household members, and thereby facilitated or hampered their social interactions. The order and use of space are often approached separately, but the relationship between space and those who use it is reciprocal. Meanings of space are created in the interaction of the organisation and the use of space, in daily habits and in routines of living: by their acts, movements and gestures, users shape their space while spatial arrangements in turn shape the possibilities for inhabitants’ actions (Certeau, 1980; Silverman, 1996, p. 14; Grosz, 2002, p. 7; Saarikangas, 2002, pp. 558–559).

The Kitchen as the Workstation of the Active Housewife

The kitchen can be seen as a focal point of the reconceptualisation of Finnish homes from the 1930s to the 1950s. It can even be argued that modernisation entered the dwelling through the kitchen. The idea of the modern dwelling was established as a model of housing planning in the 1930s as part of the Finnish and Nordic version of international modernism called Functionalism. White Functionalism was connected with the construction of a new, independent Finland (1917) and the creation of a pure, healthy and well-organised nation, signalling the urge to ‘break with the past’. Housing conditions were discussed as an issue of importance not only for the welfare of citizens, but also for the future of the nation (Saarikangas, 1999, pp. 186–187).

The space of new dwellings was reorganised completely according to demands of practicality and hygiene. Spatially and functionally differentiated rooms replaced previous undifferentiated rooms of equal size. What seems to have been considered most important by the inhabitants, as it was emphasised repeatedly in recollections about moving into the new homes, was that the new, dazzling white and pure dwellings all had modern conveniences, including central heating, kitchen fittings and hot and cold running water (Aström, 1999, pp. 103–114; Saarikangas, 2002, pp. 425–426).

Cleanliness in the home converged on the kitchen. The kitchen was turned into a clearly demarcated laboratory-like workstation for one person, the new kind of active and practical housewife. Its space was reserved strictly for cooking and washing dishes, with no place for eating meals or interacting socially. The change was particularly important in comparison with worker and rural dwellings, which lacked separate kitchens. Instead, habitation in them was based on an undifferentiated multipurpose room in which various activities (cooking, eating, sleeping and entertainment) all took place. In upper- and middle-class dwellings the large kitchen was located on the margin of the dwelling, the less valued side facing the backyard. It was a dark and concealed workspace for the domestic staff connected to the rest of the dwelling only through a service pantry. It often provided sleeping space for the maid as well. Purportedly ‘classless’, Functionalist dwellings were designed for all social classes and regarded as especially beneficial for the working class and growing middle-class. Such designs, however, were modelled on ideals of middle-class habitation and domesticity (Saarikangas, 2002, p. 259).
The notions of home, kitchen and women were in a circular relationship and tied closely to multiple levels, from the planning and representations of the kitchen to the activities of daily life. Female professionals specialising in proper and clean living environments—architects, domestic scientists and teachers—occupied a central position in the creation of the modern, systematically designed home. Although there were some efforts to collectivise household work and transfer it outside homes to a central kitchen, the main solution in Finland was the private kitchen within the private apartment. Efforts to reorganise the kitchen space were connected to changes in the role of the family and women. On one hand, the aim was to facilitate work and thereby liberate women to work outside the home and even allow time for recreation. On the other hand, the aim was to create a new kind of professional housewife who would take care of household tasks on her own (Setälä, 1931, p. 13; Suominen-Kokkonen, 1992, pp. 76–77; Heinonen, 1998, p. 161).

The kitchen soon became the most hygienic and efficient space in the home. During the 1920s, the rearrangement of Finnish kitchens was connected closely with the Nordic call for ‘more beautiful everyday things’, in which the practical and aesthetic aspects of daily living were combined. These considerations continued into the 1930s and were combined with the international doctrine of Taylorism and methods of scientific management in industry. The kitchen became an object of time-and-motion studies and endless technological improvements for saving work and time. The kitchen’s spatial transformations affected the movements, postures and gestures of its users. Only one person at a time could work in its new, efficient space. To minimise the work effort, the repetitive and monotonous model of factory work performed alone on the assembly line was transferred to the modern kitchen (Henderson, 1996, pp. 245–246). With superfluous movements reduced, household work could be performed standing in one place.

Within the modern home dedicated to the new nuclear and, by definition, heterosexual family, different household members were associated with different spaces: with house designers insisting that the housewife ruled the kitchen, the bedroom was the place for the married couple and for boys and girls separately, and the living room was reserved for the whole family (e.g. Ekelund, 1938, p. 343). The kitchen—and the home—was thus defined as the workplace of the active housewife which meant, in turn, that the home was a place of rest for the father and children. Space and time were intertwined when the ‘functionally differentiated woman’ changed roles and places from housewife to spouse and mother according to the time of day (Huldt & Waern-Bugge, 1944, p. 7; see also Götansdotter, 1999, p. 52).

The complex connection between women and cleanliness culminated in the kitchen. The main themes in the rearrangement of the kitchen were hygiene and transforming housewifery into a profession. Purifying the home and keeping the kitchen clean became tasks of the modern woman. The role of the middle-class housewife changed from being the mistress of the home to being an active and practical homemaker. Conceptually, housework was transformed from reproductive and invisible work, considered to be the dirty domain of servants or women of lower social classes, into productive and valued work by the housewife or perheenemäntä herself5. The transformations of the kitchen challenged relationships between women as much as between genders. This change was connected to the changed social and economic situation. The number of urban middle-class
women working outside the home for wages had grown. At the same time, the
growing middle class could no longer afford domestic servants. Consequently, the
planning of functional and hygienic kitchens received more attention. The kitchen
was transformed from an unplanned territory of servants into a carefully
designed workspace of the efficient (house)wife. In the campaign against dirt,
voiced in public health debates and discourse on housing and homemaking,
women, unlike men, were perceived as playing active roles (see Lehtonen, 1999,
pp. 85–92; Saarikangas, 2002, pp. 121–123). The cleanliness of the home and with
it, the cleanliness of family and children, was defined as a mother’s sphere of
influence. Home economics was defined as an important part of society, and
women constituted an important link between dwelling (‘small home’) and
society (‘big home’).

The new kitchen was often placed near the living room and thus moved from
the margin towards the centre of the dwelling. However, it still remained a
closed part of the home. In order to offer peace and calm for the husband,
housework had to remain unnoticeable. The spatial arrangement of the modern
dwelling produced and reproduced the idea of the home and the kitchen in
particular as the work place of the housewife; she was represented as the chief
user of the kitchen (Saarikangas, 2002, p. 271; Llewellyn, 2004, p. 51)6. The
attempt was to separate kitchen work, which was defined as sanitary labour,
strictly away to its own space. Eating was separated from the realities of cooking
and washing dishes; eating was defined as a social event whereas cooking was
housework conducted alone. No extra time was supposed to be spent in the
kitchen. Living and being together was to be transferred from the stuffy and
unclean atmosphere of the kitchen to the new living room and even outside the
private apartment. The kitchen, with its fumes, odours and foodstuffs, was
considered an unhygienic place, where the relationship between what was
regarded as material and feminine was underlined (Aalto, 1930, p. 25; Setälä,

Improvements in the standard of the kitchen saved labour and indeed were
Simultaneously, the separate kitchen can be seen as both isolating the person who
worked there—the housewife—alone with her domestic chores and devaluing her
work by the small and demarcated location of her workspace. While most women
believed that the new, practical kitchens eased the burdens of their daily life, they
also defined housework as a specifically feminine area9. It can thus be argued
that with its division of space, the modern ‘technically perfected machine’, as
architect Hilding Ekelund called new homes, reinforced and renewed gender
differences (Figure 1).

Open Space and Fluid Boundaries of the Kitchen in the 1950s

The small, separate kitchen attracted criticism from women early on and, indeed,
ever gained popularity in Finnish housing. The modern kitchen was ‘so small
that you can hardly turn around in it’, complained home economist Laura
Harmaja (1939, p. 744) in an influential women’s magazine, Kotiliesi (‘Home
Hearth’, established in 1922). The separation of cooking and dining also went
against the ingrained habits of most Finns. They used their new dwellings ‘against
the grain’ and continued to dine in the small kitchens, even going so far as to eat
However, in Finland, the popularity of the laboratory kitchen lasted only a short time (Figure 2). The reorganisation of Finnish everyday life and the rearrangement of dwelling spaces culminated in the post-war reconstruction period\(^{10}\). The enormous rebuilding effort spread modern housing models efficiently into the Finnish countryside as well as into the new suburbs. Throughout the 1940s, most of the new building took place in rural areas in the form of one-and-a-half-storey wooden family houses called veterans’ houses. The reconstruction of urban areas, in the form of new forest suburbs, began in the 1950s. State-subsidised loans, and the accompanying planning regulations, covered 70% of Finnish housing construction during the 1940s and 1950s (Juntto, 1990, p. 228). These transformations took place simultaneously with the rapid modernisation, urbanisation and industrialisation of Finnish society as a whole.

The spatial organisation of new dwellings repeated the pre-war Functionalist ideal of the spatially differentiated family dwelling, but a significant shift occurred in the location of the kitchen and its connections to the rest of the dwelling. In the veterans’ single-family houses the kitchen became large enough to accommodate a dining table, and in the suburban apartments consisting

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**Figure 1.** Relations between gender, sexuality and architectural space were produced and reinforced both implicitly and explicitly. The floor plan of the three-room apartment from the leaflet advertising new homes in the Olympic Village (Helsinki 1939) designed by the architect Hilding Ekelund.
typically of two rooms and a kitchen, the kitchen was widened spatially into the nearby dining corner and living room (Saarikangas, 1993, p. 363, 1994, p. 237)\textsuperscript{11}. Fundamental to the new suburban home was the spatial continuum between kitchens, dining space and living room. The kitchen was no longer an enclosed,
demarcated space, but was now integrated into the family rooms of the home. Changes in spatial arrangements also affected inhabitants’ interactions and encounters. Recollections of many of the more than 300 residents who lived in the new suburbs around Helsinki emphasised that even sensations, smells, voices, touches and gestures changed (see Saarikangas, 2002, pp. 420–447).

Open spaces set different areas of home life side by side, enabling functions of the different spaces to merge. A centrally placed living room with its dining corner and nearby kitchen united the inhabitants and placed the mother in a pivotal role (Figure 3). Fluid boundaries between different rooms, or between inside and outside the home, laid emphasis on vision, on seeing and being seen, which Beatriz Colomina (1994, p. 7) has regarded as a central feature of modern architecture. Continuous, transparent spaces underlined the connections between inhabitants, especially between mother and children. The mother, working in the kitchen, had visual and aural contact with the dining space where children played or did their homework, and further on to the living room. Through the large windows and balcony she could watch the children playing in the courtyard. Meanwhile, because the courtyard was connected to the home, each became an extension of the other. This dual function was emphasised in domestic magazines and widely published housing manuals (Sariola, 1941, p. 6; Mäenpää, 1955, pp. 11–12; see also Saarikangas, 2002, p. 429).

Open kitchens put housework on show. This ‘making visible’ of the everyday signified a radical change in terms of domestic labour. In Functionalist homes, domestic work remained invisible and voices and smells from the kitchen stayed behind closed doors. In the homes of the 1950s, however, previously hidden housework occupied a central position, and the continuum of the kitchen and living room emerged as the core of the dwelling. This brought housework conducted alone nearer to the social atmosphere of the family’s shared spaces (Saarikangas, 2002, pp. 564–566).

In her discussion on gender and space, Daphne Spain (1992, p. 134) has suggested that the open plan might be less gendered than the spatially differentiated dwelling. Indeed, open kitchen solutions emphasised the visibility of housework and brought housework into the modern living room, which in turn was regarded as a heterogeneous meeting place for household members of different ages and genders. However, the relation between gender and open transparent space is more complicated (see Attfield, 1999, p. 76). The questions of gender and class, clean and unclean, were intricately interwoven in the opening-up of the kitchen and

Figure 3. New open living room with the nearby kitchen formed the centre of the new home. Photograph from the late 1950s suburban home in Lauttasaari, western Helsinki. Private collection.
the fading-out of its boundaries, affecting the movements of inhabitants and how
gazes, voices and smells travelled throughout the dwelling. The privatisation of
habitation and the definition of the entire dwelling as the realm of the nuclear
family can be regarded as a precondition for the spatial opening up of the kitchen.
Transferring the housework from domestic servants to housewives was another
precondition for making everyday life visible. Furthermore, spatial openness and
the display of the everyday meant growing demands for the cleanliness of the
kitchen. Whereas demands on hygiene were first affected by spatial separation, it
seems that during the 1950s the whole of domestic life and housework in particular
were purified and its material traces reduced. The emphasis on the everyday was
connected to the new aesthetics of simplicity and cleanliness. New, no-nonsense
kitchens with their shining materials, light colours and new objects represented and
also produced the idea of bare cleanliness detached from the realities of cooking
and carrying out housework—and demanded continuous cleaning.

The kitchen–living room continuum emerged as a hub of the dwelling both
spatially and in the daily routine of living together. This emphasised the idea of
the home as a feminised space with the active mother as its core. There existed,
however, a paradox between the modern home as a feminine space and the gender
equality thinking in Finnish modernism. By 1950, over 30% of married women
living in towns were working outside the home (Jallinoja, 1983, pp. 120–121)12.
The idea of efficient domesticity perpetuated rural traditions and reproduced the
national myth of strong women (see also Koivunen, 2003, p. 114). Modern Finnish
women, it was believed, would perform the work easily both inside and outside
the home (Myrdal & Klein, 1956). However, it might also be suggested that in
cleansing the home of class difference and the reality of housework, the home was
also purged of the very features understood as feminine, i.e. decorative and
abundant furnishings and unnecessary objects. Useless things, including carpets
or curtains, were no longer needed, because they only accumulated dust and dirt.
Instead, the display of the functionality of the everyday was ascetic and severe
(Kalha, 2000, p. 38). Simplicity and bareness became the very objects of
representation, masks of themselves. Finnish architecture and design of the 1950s,
a ‘golden age’ in Finnish building history, framed domestic spaces in which
women and children performed their daily activities and reinvented the objects in
the home for a new, modern generation of women. Transformations in the space,
outlook and use of the kitchen can thus be seen as a redefinition of the
interrelationship between femininity and modernity.

As designers and planners, however, women also actively transformed the
kitchen. Women can thus be seen as subjects of their environment in two senses of
the word (Foucault, 1976, p. 81). The new spatial arrangement of the kitchen and
its contents affected space, time and the bodies of the inhabitants, creating new
tempos and routes, different ‘pathways for habits’ (Young, 1997, p. 150). New
homes and the living habits they engendered, with their emphasis on the value of
the everyday, might also be seen as sites of dignity and integrity, as feminist
cultural critic bell hooks has suggested in a different context (hooks, 1990, p. 42).
This underlines the positive and creative aspects of homemaking.

Through their daily activities, women infused multiple levels of meaning into
their homes, producing meaningful spaces. For them, homes and kitchens were
centres of numerous acts, which they constantly shaped and reshaped as their own
through their corporeal habits, actions and routines, and were shaped in turn by
The meanings of kitchen or gendered identities were thus not fixed, but rather constantly in flux.

Notes
1. Finnish original: ‘Hyvin järjestetty keittiö on kuin pieni laboratorio, se vähentää työtä ja säästää siten vapaa-aikaa, jonka itse kukin voi parhaiten käyttää, se antaa työn iloa. Järjestetty nykyaikainen laboratorikeittiö ei ole mikään muodon oikku, vaan se on ajan vaatimus.’
2. Three questionnaires asking for written remembrances of living in the new suburbs after the Second World War (1945–65) were collected in the Helsinki area in 1995–2000. The first, ‘Helsinki as a living environment’ [Helsinki elämänypäräistönä], was collected by ethnologist Anna-Maria Åström in 1995. The second, ‘Life in the suburbs’ [Elämää lähiöissä], was collected by the newspaper Helsingin Sanomat (1995). It is kept in the Helsinki City Archives and published partly in Astikainen et al. (1997). The third, ‘The story of Kontula’ [Kontulan tarina], was collected by the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literature Society (2000). It is published partly in Kokkonen (2002).
3. This challenges the distinction between the active production of space by planners and its passive consumption by users and involves more dynamic notion on space and buildings, such as the constant cycle of production and reproduction of space and its meanings in its everyday use. I do not enter more deeply into these discussions here.
4. Owing to the economic recession, which halted almost all construction in the 1930s, no substantial Functionalist housing districts were built in Finland until the end of the decade.
5. In fact, the Finnish word perheenemäntä is not equivalent to the English ‘housewife’ because the word also refers to the active and productive aspects of home economics in rural society; emäntä meant household manager. The idea of active housewifery was connected to the notion of ‘dichotomous citizenship’ and two complementary genders as the basis for Finnish social thinking from the 1930s onwards.
6. For example, measurements of the new, standardised kitchen fittings published in 1945 were based on the average bodily dimensions of Finnish women (Simberg, 1945, pp. 72–73).
7. The modern family should spend its leisure time outside the private apartment, engaging in public activities such as sports or concerts, as architect Alvar Aalto maintained in advocating the new minimal dwellings.
8. As one woman described her new home: ‘It was wonderful. There was an electric stove in a small kitchen, a bathtub in the bathroom and warm water every day. It was like a hundred years had passed from our previous dwelling’ [Finnish original: ‘Ihanaa siellä oli kaksi valoisaa huonetta. Pienoisköihin sääköihelä, kylpyhuoneessa amme ja lämmin vesi oli käytettävissä joka päivä. Oli kuin sata vuotta olisi kulunut’] (cited in Saarikangas, 2002, p. 426).
9. Yet, as has often been pointed out, technical aids and labour-saving kitchens increased rather than decreased women’s domestic burden (Worden, 1989, pp. 139–140; Saarikangas, 1993, pp. 360–361).
10. Owing to the economic recession in the 1930s, there was a lack of housing even before the war. After the war, new houses had to be built to replace those destroyed by bombing. Moreover, a flood of Karelian refugees from the territories ceded to the Soviet Union had to be resettled: more than 400,000 people, or one-eighth of the total Finnish population.
11. However, transformations were not abrupt, but different models and ideals of housing existed side by side, and new ideals gradually replaced previous ones. For example, many housing areas designed during the 1930s were completed after the war.
12. In fact, the participation of Finnish women in working life and full-time employment was higher than in the other Nordic or European countries; in Sweden, for example, only some 15% of women were working outside the home in 1950.

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Gender and Visibility of Domestic Work in the Finnish Kitchen


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Exhibiciones de lo cotidiano: Relaciones entre género y la visibilidad de trabajo doméstica en la cocina moderna de Finlandia desde 1930 hasta 1950

Resumen Este artículo discute relaciones e interacciones entre género y los arreglos espaciales de cocinas en las casas modernas finlandés desde la década de los treinta hasta los años cincuenta. Se enfoca el aspecto de género de la habitación: la interrelación entre las planificaciones ideales y los espacios vividos de la cocina moderna. La modernización de casas fue concentrado en la cocina, un área que se volvió una estación de trabajo pequeña, eficiente y racional para una persona, a saber la ama de casa activa y profesional. El objetivo durante los treintas era separar el trabajo de cocina, definido como antihigiénico, en su propio espacio estrictamente lejos de otras partes de la casa, mientras que en los cincuentas un espacio continuo entre la cocina, la sala de comer, y la sala de estar se centralizó. La cocina ya no era un espacio cerrado sino que se integró en los cuartos de la familia de la casa. Esto ‘haciendo visible’ del trabajo de la ama de casa significó un cambio radical en términos del labor doméstico, que ahora recibió una posición visible en la casa. Sin embargo, significó también que tareas domésticas debía ser purificado y sus marcas materiales femeninas eran reducidos. Cocinas, con sus superficies blancas deslumbrante, fueron interpretado por lo general de haber estado limpiado de perifollos y decoraciones femeninas. En lugar de una negación de feminidad, yo contendería que esta purificación se podría entender como su redefinición.
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