



Deposited via The University of York.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:

<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/234915/>

Version: Published Version

---

**Article:**

ASCIUTO, NICOLETTA (2026) "Among his pots and pans": Domestic Work and Gender Roles in Mina Loy's Florentine Poems, 1914-1915. *De genere: rivista di studi letterari, postcoloniali e di genere*. pp. 49-62. ISSN: 2465-2415

---

**Reuse**

This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) licence. This licence only allows you to download this work and share it with others as long as you credit the authors, but you can't change the article in any way or use it commercially. More information and the full terms of the licence here: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/>

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



---

---

## “Among his pots and pans”: Domestic Work and Gender Roles in Mina Loy’s Florentine Poems, 1914–1915

Nicoletta Ascuito  
University of York  
[nicoletta.asciuto@york.ac.uk](mailto:nicoletta.asciuto@york.ac.uk)

This essay examines a selection of poems written by British-born poet and artist Mina Loy (1882–1966) in 1914–1915, while living in Florence. These poems constitute Loy’s early poetic production, effectively marking her beginning as a writer. In these poems from and about Florence, Loy observes, and comments on, Italian women’s lives and their involvement in domestic (or household) work. Looking closely at these poems, and the representation of Italian women’s lives in them, enables us to better understand Loy’s own development as a feminist in tandem with her critique of gender roles in early twentieth-century Italian society. The poems discussed in this essay include “Italian Pictures”, “The Effectual Marriage or the Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni”, and “Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots”.

**Nicoletta Ascuito** is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in Modern Literature at the University of York. She is the author of *Brilliant Modernism: Cultures of Light and Modernist Poetry* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2025). She is co-investigator for York on a project funded by the European Commission, “EUTERPE: European Literatures and Gender from a Transnational Perspective.” Nicoletta has published various articles on modernist poetry, as well as literary translations. Her latest translation work includes the first Italian translations of Hope Mirrlees’s *Paris. A Poem* (Interno Poesia, 2025) and of Kimberly Campanello’s “Moving Nowhere Here” (in *Poesia: rivista internazionale di cultura poetica*, vol. 32, 2025).



## Introduction

In the introduction to their field-defining *Salt Companion to Mina Loy*, Suzanne Hobson and Rachel Potter call Mina Loy the “brilliant literary enigma of modernism” (2010, 1). This is a definition I have often returned to when writing about Loy (Asciuto 2025, 111, 117). The definition suits her like no other could, in that it encompasses Loy’s different lives, leaving us to ponder how such strikingly different personas could coexist in any single person. While this 2010 epithet successfully placed Loy on the map of Modernist Studies, it also highlighted Loy’s own resistance to being pigeonholed within a particular category. Ten years later, borrowing from the lexicon of classical ballet, Suzanne W. Churchill, Linda A. Kinnahan, and Susan Rosenbaum retheorized Loy as belonging to the “*en dehors garde*”, a term which allows them to revise Loy as one “not conform[ing] to the ‘martialised,’ oppositional stance associated with the historical avant-garde”, therefore performing a circular movement away from and back towards a dominant stance.<sup>1</sup> In her life and works, Loy circled her way around most artistic movements and cultural sensibilities of the twentieth century, in a non-linear pattern, unlike many contemporaneous artists and authors.<sup>2</sup> Loy was a writer, a painter, a visual artist, a feminist, a Futurist, a Dadaist, and latterly a Surrealist (Conover 1996, xiii). This list would have sufficed most, both intellectually and artistically, but she was also, professionally, an inventor, a businesswoman, a designer and maker of clothes, hats, lamps and lampshades, and the owner of a shop (Shreiber and Tuma 1998, 13-14; Burstein 2012, 152). Having had to raise three children as a single parent (albeit, for stretches of time, with the help of nannies), and as a woman of some, but limited, economic privilege, Loy necessarily came to see her artistic life as directly interrelated to the demands of work and household (or domestic) care.<sup>3</sup> This experience, I argue, gave her in turn a rather critical outlook on women’s work.

Loy’s pirouetting through different roles and jobs matched an acute restlessness across the various geographical locations she could call home.<sup>4</sup> Born in London in 1882, to a Hungarian Jewish father and an English mother of presumed Evangelical faith, Loy spent only her childhood and teenage years in England (Burke 1996, 15). Wanting to pursue her artistic goals, and to escape her mother’s restrictions on her social behaviour (Burke 1996, 16; Gross 2023, 5), she mostly lived out of Great Britain, spending crucial years for her artistic identity formation in Germany, France, and Italy, before settling in the United States (with a detour via Mexico). While her attitudes to work and art vary across her oeuvre, it is in Italy, while observing the behaviour, and condition, of Italian women, that she most pointedly articulates her opinions on gender roles. Two events would seem to have encouraged this crystallization. First, Loy settled in Florence

---

<sup>1</sup> In classical ballet, it refers to moving one’s leg outward first and then beyond one’s centre. See Churchill, Kinnahan, and Rosenbaum: “*En dehors* means “toward the outside” or “turning outward.” In ballet, it describes a directional movement: a dancer’s leg moves outward and away from the supporting leg, where the weight is centered. It is an outward movement, reaching outward and beyond the center. [...] The *en dehors* movement also has a circular quality: the dancer’s leg curves outward with an eye toward that center as a point of return. The circular motion does not follow a linear trajectory. It is also not hierarchical, having nothing to do with who is in front or behind.” (2020, “En Dehors Garde”).

<sup>2</sup> Think of T. S. Eliot, whose most controversial career decision might have been to start writing commercial theatre plays, but never, formally or informally, joined any historical avant-garde movement.

<sup>3</sup> It is no chance that in *Cold Modernism* Jessica Burstein should adopt “the term ‘domestica’ to emphasize the household elements in Loy, crossed as they are with a rigid eroticism that makes strange the recognizable circuits of the everyday” (Burstein 2012, 152).

<sup>4</sup> For more on Mina Loy’s transnational trajectory throughout her life, see Bozhkova 2019.

with her first husband Stephen Haweis under very particular circumstances. As Mina was pregnant with the child of another man (her Parisian psychiatrist Henri Joël Le Savoureux), the Haweises may have decided to leave France for Italy in search for cheaper lodgings and a more economical lifestyle (Burke 1996, 103-104).<sup>5</sup> Arriving in Arcetri (a hilly area on the outskirts of Florence) in 1907, Loy was therefore immediately confronted with the reality of her new life as a mother-to-be, while finding herself suddenly responsible, if only temporarily, for Villino Ombrellino, a home quite removed from the amenities of central Florence, and certainly several hundreds of miles away from artsy Paris (Burke 1996, 105-106).<sup>6</sup> A few months later, the couple moved to lodgings on Costa di San Giorgio, in the Oltrarno district (a central location in Florence), a significantly more densely populated area, in which she would begin observing “the passionate Italian life-traffic” directly from her windows (Burke 1996, 115; Churchill, Kinnahan, and Rosenbaum 2020, “Mapping Florence: First Tour, Loy at Home”; *LLB* 10). This location in a “working-class district” also “put her in an awkward position, that of someone who did and did not fully belong to the English community” (Scuriatti 2024, 155). Even in her position as an expat, Loy would hover between the social circles of Anglo-Florence, and the lived experiences of Italians at the time.

The second relevant event to Loy’s crystallization of her opinions on gender roles was her encounter with Italian Futurism. Not only did she start to write in a Futurist vein shortly after meeting Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the mythical father-founder of Italian Futurism, but she also entertained relatively short-lived but intense amorous relationships with both Marinetti and Giovanni Papini, the Florentine philosopher and editor of the Italian magazine *Lacerba* (published in Florence, 1913-1915). This encounter was one that had a deep impact on Loy, both professionally and personally. In February 1914, Loy wrote to her friend Mabel Dodge Luhan in February 1914: “I am in the throes of conversion to Futurism<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>But I shall never convince myself<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>There is no hope in any system that combats ‘le mal avec le mal’” (Luhan Papers, folder 664). Subsequently, in a letter to Carl Van Vechten, Loy would clarify her position: “if you like you can say that Marinetti influenced me merely by waking me up I am in no way considered a Futurist by Futurists—& as for G. Papini he has in no way influenced—my work!!” (Van Vechten Papers, box 76). The Futurists “waking Loy up” marks a key moment in her life and career, as this encounter with the Futurists spurred her, on the one hand, to begin writing poetry in earnest. On the other, it pushed Loy in the direction of Feminism, urging her to author her own “Feminist Manifesto” (1914), and to engage directly with the sex war initiated by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and his group of followers.<sup>7</sup>

We can assume, then, that the experience of early twentieth-century Italy—with all its contradictions and differences from England—played an important role in Mina Loy’s shaping of her own artistic persona. Loy’s “Italian” writing—that is, written in English but dating from her Florentine period and dealing with details of Italian life—

---

<sup>5</sup> Historically, Italy had offered, as Loy’s biographer suggests, an opportunity to “flee from scandal” and “remake one’s reputation” (Burke 1996, 105) to many non-Italian couples in the same situation as Stephen and Mina.

<sup>6</sup> This villa, located in the area of Bellosguardo, was a key place in Anglo-Florence: the English who came to stay loved the magnificent view over the city. It was certainly a villa for illustrious guests: Galileo Galilei lived in Villino Ombrellino for a few years, then Ugo Foscolo stayed there for a time. In 1924, the villa was bought by Violet Trefusis, an English writer who started a literary and artistic salon there. See Del Buono, Frassa, and Settembrini 1987, 38.

<sup>7</sup> On the relation between Feminism and Futurism, see Drouin 2023.

sees a feminist woman artist in the making. It is within this context that Loy nurtures her early opinions on women's work and artistic potential from both a gendered and a geolocalised perspective. By considering these poems as well as her correspondence from her period in Italy, this essay establishes how Loy understood, and shaped her own opinions on, the gendering of work and art in early twentieth-century Italian society.

Giuliana Artom Treves famously said of Florence's English inhabitants that they would not, historically, have mingled with the locals: "l'amore per la città [è] sempre bilanciato col più assoluto ignorarne gli abitanti, i *natives*" (Artom Treves 1973, 9; "the love for the city of Florence is always offset against the most extreme act of ignoring its inhabitants, the *natives*"; emphasis in original).<sup>8 9</sup> This acknowledgement of the stalled relationship between Florentines and Anglo-Florentines recalls E. M. Forster's 1908 novel *A Room with a View*, in which the few Italians portrayed belong to the realm of the picturesque, if not to that of violent passions.<sup>10</sup> As Loy's biographer suggests, Loy shared "the British view of Italians as closer to the instinctual responses of the unrepressed" (Burke 1996, 117). But, as an early twentieth-century observer of Italian life, Loy at once confirms and contradicts the beliefs of English people in Tuscany. Some examples of her interactions with other Italians would include her relationships with Marinetti and Papini, her work as a nurse in Florence during World War One, and her decision to live on the Costa San Giorgio, a densely populated street in which Loy lived elbow-to-elbow with Italian women. Yet in her Florentine poems Italian women always appear at a distance, always busy with something else which Loy's women speakers do not seem to fully comprehend, let alone second.

In Carl Van Vechten's collection of *Sacred and Profane Memories* (1932), he reports a conversation between himself and "Ducie" (another nickname for Mina Loy), which the two had in Vallombrosa in the summer of 1914.<sup>11</sup> From this reported conversation we gain a glimpse of the conventional opinion of Italian women circulating among Loy's circle of English and American friends in Florence:

Of course, Italian women are usually dreadfully dull, I remarked.  
They exist only for one purpose, she [Ducie Haweis] declared.  
Then we tried to make a list of famous Italian women, aside from opera singers. A few, like Petrarch's Laura or Dante's Beatrice occurred to us, but even these existed only as the names of women great men have loved. There was, of course, Duse, but she had lived a life of almost complete negation. In the realm of literature one solitary name occurred to us, that of the not too illustrious Matilda [sic] Serao. Italian women do not appear to have left a deep impression on history.

(Van Vechten 1932, 116-117)

---

<sup>8</sup> All translations from Italian, unless otherwise stated, are mine.

<sup>9</sup> American author Mary McCarthy would reiterate much the same in *The Stones of Florence* (1959) when talking about the Brownings, who "revelled in Florentine history and hated the Austrian usurper [...], but they did not mingle socially with the natives; they kept themselves to themselves" (McCarthy 1963, 15-16).

<sup>10</sup> Think, for example, of the two Italians violently arguing over cinque lire by the Loggia della Signoria, which causes the protagonist, Lucy, to faint (Forster 1978, 62-63), or the couple of young Italians flirting on the carriage taking the English characters out "to see a view" in Fiesole (Forster 1978, 79).

<sup>11</sup> Loy had spent those months on the Apennines near Florence, to try to recuperate "from a nervous breakdown, psychological illness, or depression of some kind" (Conover 1996, 177). Vallombrosa is home to a Benedictine abbey and to the monastic religious order of the Vallombrosians.

What was the “one purpose” to which Loy then thought Italian women were consigned? Serving men? Procreating and raising children? Doing housework? Yet while Loy may have thought the lives of early twentieth-century Italian women were too everyday and inglorious to leave a deep mark on history, her Florentine poems are full of such women. As Tim Hancock urges in his article on Loy’s Italian poems, the reader and scholar of her early poems ought to attend to matters of “local detail”, in order to understand Loy’s strive for “truth-telling and verisimilitude” in her poems (Hancock 2005, 178-179). Indeed, Yasna Bozhkova confirms the importance of observing for Loy, claiming that “Loy’s early poems written in France and Italy are already emblematic of her strategies of cross-cultural travel and transnational observation” (2019, 3). Loy, as an outsider in the Italian society of the time, was in a privileged position to closely observe Italian women around her. By looking at her poems, this essay wants to show how these observations shaped her own opinions about gender roles and domestic work.

### **An Englishwoman, watching: Italian women’s domestic work lives**

In the Costa San Giorgio house Loy’s father had purchased for them, the couple had access to two studios on the top floor, which they could use for painting (Burke 1996, 117; Churchill, Kinnahan, and Rosenbaum 2020, “Mapping Florence: First Tour, Loy at Home”).<sup>12</sup> However, while she did continue to practice as a painter, it is here, as we have seen, that she took up writing, in part as a response to the life of the street. Observing the women of the Costa San Giorgio from her window enabled Loy to filter her own concerns about the condition of women through what she could witness (and, at times, reimagine), in Florence. Many of the women she watched and wrote about (including herself) were engaged in one or more of the “mestieri da donne” (women’s professions) identified by historian Anna Bellavitis: “[s]ervire, nutrire, curare, mettere al mondo e prostituirsi” (to serve, to feed, to nurse, to work as a midwife, and to prostitute oneself; Bellavitis 2016, 161). While this list is not exhaustive, it helps highlight the areas and categories of work which had been historically gendered female.<sup>13</sup> The portrayal of all these types of women’s work on the streets of Florence features in Loy’s early poems and necessarily intersects with the development of her views on feminism: as Loy watches the condition of Italian women at work, she begins to reflect on their, and her own, condition.

In Loy’s first poem openly about Italy, “Italian Pictures” (written summer 1914, published in *The Trend* in November 1914; Conover 1996, 177), we witness a caustic portrayal of women in “imposed confinement”, attending to, and preserving, their own virginity, and “expos[ing] the gendered violence upon which the sentimental economy relies” (Crangle 2024, *Nethered Regions*, 73). While most of it is about Loy’s lived experience of the Costa San Giorgio street and neighbourhood, this first section, entitled “*July in Vallombrosa*”, sees a woman speaker in the Apennine village of Vallombrosa, surrounded by “[s]isters of mercy” (*LLB* 9, line 3):<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Both Loy and Haweis studied painting in Paris. For more on their time in Paris, see Burke 1996, 67-104; for more on Loy’s artwork, see Gross 2023, 2-103.

<sup>13</sup> Bellavitis historicizes the various classifications of women’s work in the modern age in the subchapter of her book, “I lavori delle donne” (2016, 19-22).

<sup>14</sup> All references from Mina Loy’s poems and prose are from *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger Conover (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1996), and are indicated in the text as *LLB* and followed by page and line numbers.

Of all permissible pastimes  
 Attendant upon chastity  
 The one which you can most efficiently insult  
 Life  
 Is your hobby of collecting death-beds  
 Blue Nun

(*LLB* 9, lines 12-17)

Even as Loy's speaker addresses one of the nuns directly as the "you" of the poem, she decides not to portray them as active, busy nurses (as one might imagine them to be), but rather she sees them in semi-stillness. Their actions are merely a "pastime" or a "hobby". While various orders of nuns—both Italian and English—wore a blue dress, Tara Prescott helpfully identifies Loy's nuns with the order of "The Little Company of Mary", who had a convent in San Girolamo in Fiesole, and were known for "running nursing homes, hospitals, and asylums in Italy, England, Ireland, Australia, Malta, and the United States", providing comfort and help in their blue habit (Prescott 2017, 50). Loy's earlier reference to "a British practitioner" (*LLB* 9, line 11) suggests that these nursing nuns may well be from England, but what the speaker in her poem seems to find most troubling is their reinforcement of chastity as a virtue and, effectively, their establishing of inaction, or "prolonged invalidism" (*LLB* 9, line 9). They are, to her, the opposite of work; they are, indeed, the opposite of the majority of women who would have been busy with a professional occupation of some sort.

To that effect, Loy's speaker necessarily contrasts the nuns with the Italian women busying away in Vallombrosa:

While round the hotel  
 Wanton Italian matrons  
 Discuss the better business of bed-linen  
 To regular puncture of needles

(*LLB* 9, lines 23-26)

Life in this Apennine village frequented by English and Italians alike is framed by the stillness of the nuns looking after the invalid (and also, to some extent, proposing one way of social invalidism) and the busy work of the local women, which represent Loy's own view on gendered divisions in the society of the time. On the one side, the "Blue Nun[s]" caring for the sick and the dying, promoting "chastity"; on the other, the "business" of the "Italian matrons" working in the area, in all sorts of jobs and roles. Effectively, the "business" of these women signals at once the occupation (if not the profession) thanks to which they earn a living, and their actions and activity—their "busy-ness", as we may re-write it. Loy contrasts the variegated work of the matrons (Sex? Childcare? Laundry? Needlework? Nursing? Domestic service?) with the nuns' sole duty of preserving chastity; while the wanton women make (and unmake) marital beds, the nuns are devoted to "collecting death-beds" (Prescott 2017, 51). Loy sees this division between lay women and nuns as also one which distinguishes between work and the absence of work, between a material, sensual life, and an allegedly spiritual one.

In "*The Costa San Giorgio*," the second poem in "Italian Pictures," Loy returns to the theme of chastity and virginity, juxtaposed to ideas of work and human passions. Taking life in her neighbourhood as a starting point, the poem begins with a recognition of the business Italians appear to constantly be engaging in: "We English make a tepid blot / On the messiness / Of the passionate Italian life-traffic" (*LLB* 10, lines 1-3). While

Loy reprises the common stereotype of the passionless English against the “messy” Italian (as also in Forster’s *A Room with a View*), she also makes a not-so-veiled reference to work. Here, “traffic” refers to trade and commerce, the traffic of goods rather than of vehicles or means of transport. Even more so in Florence, which has been historically “a working city, a market centre, a railway junction”, and a place manufacturing all sorts of items (McCarthy 1963, 16), the Italians are full of “passionate [...] life-traffic” even in the everyday act of selling goods on the streets, or at local markets. In the second part of the poem, Loy includes a list of businesses and things for sale, but none of them is strictly connected to women, who are rather depicted as either “sway[ing] / Among the crawling children they produce” (*LLB* 10, lines 8-9) or, quite plainly, as “mistresses” (*LLB* 11, line 18). A number of women would have been involved in the selling and buying of goods on the streets of Florence at that time as in previous centuries, but by the end of the nineteenth century Italian society had started to adopt, and legislatively implement, the “male breadwinner model,” which “aimed to protect women in their biological reproductive role in society” (Freschi 2024, 78). This shift relegated many women to their societal role of mothers, a trend which did not escape the attention of feminist-in-the-making Loy.

This trend is particularly visible in the second to last stanza of Loy’s poem. After observing life in the street, her speaker re-directs our attention to domestic work inside the house, giving us a glimpse of the women’s life behind closed doors:

For there is little to do  
The false pillow-spreads  
Hugely initialed  
Already adjusted  
On matrimonial beds  
And the glint on the china virgin  
Consummately dusted  
(*LLB* 12, lines 53-59)

Loy returns to the theme of women and “matrimonial beds”, even as here they are not seen to be making them and unmaking them. For the women of the Costa San Giorgio, there is not much else to do, other than prepare the bed and dust the room, waiting for sexual consummation to happen. In this poem, unlike the previous one, women’s work is largely confined to the domestic sphere. The household becomes an extension of the woman’s self, and looking after it even an extension of her own sexuality. It is that which she prepares, perhaps for the arrival of some “intimacy” (*LLB* 12, line 64), even as Loy’s speaker hints again at passivity and inaction (“For there is little to do”, *LLB* 12, line 53).

In such lines and turns of phrases as the ones discussed up to now, we witness Loy beginning to reflect on the condition of women. Only a few months later, in November 1914, Loy would be writing her own “Feminist Manifesto”, which however she would never see published while she was alive. The manifesto clearly displays “the qualities of New Woman writing”, such as “discuss[ing] women’s sexual desire and defiantly depict[ing] heterosexual love from a subjectively reformist female perspective” (Parmar 2013, 34). In her manifesto, she calls women to arms “to demolish [...] the division of women into two classes **the mistress, & the mother**”, claiming that “Nature has endowed the complete woman with a faculty for expressing herself through all her functions—there are **no restrictions**” (*LLB* 154; emphasis in original). Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto” notes the traditional binary representation of

women as mother (or madonna) and whore, while urging women to go beyond the binary, embracing all facets of their own self, rather than being asked to choose. To borrow Laura Scuriatti's words, Loy is "call[ing] for a feminism of difference": certainly following other feminist thinkers of the time, Loy wanted to reclaim women's "right both for sexual desire and fulfillment [...], and for maternity" (Scuriatti 2019, 53-54; emphasis in original). Her witnessing of Italian women on the streets of Florence (rather than an intimate knowledge of them) must have informed her reflections on the limiting duality of women's condition, and representation.

As Loy was a careful observer of everyday life, watching Italian women somewhat frozen in their binary condition made for a stark contrast, in her mind, with the women she encountered in Paris. Even as she writes about them while in Florence, in her memory they seem to better encapsulate the restriction-less woman, or all-embracing woman she would then be writing about in her manifesto. Across this Parisian triptych, "Three Moments in Paris" (written in 1914, and published in *Rogue* in May 1915; Conover 1996, 178), we are first introduced to a lyrical I who is "[t]he animal woman", a woman post sexual awakening ("One O'Clock at Night", *LLB* 15, line 21), and then to the heavily made-up mistresses and young women attending the Parisian amusement *Cabaret du Néant* ("Café du Néant," *LLB* 16-17). In the third section, "Magasins du Louvre," Loy represents the women of Paris in a more composite manner, with "the virgin eyes [... ] made of glass" of the dolls being sold at the Grands Magasins (*LLB* 17 lines 1-3), "the shop-girl" (line 14), and two "cocotte[s]" (lines 20-22). If the dolls on sale near the Louvre make Loy reflect on the virginity imposed on women by social and religious mores, as well as on the social obligation to procreate, the visualization of the shop-girl and the two cocottes in this poem points towards the speaker's understanding of a freer status afforded to Parisian women. Mina Loy's poetic reconstruction of her firsthand observations sees Parisian women, unlike Florentine women, wear extravagant dresses, go shopping, take a walk along the city by themselves and without children, have daytime jobs, and seem to be enjoying themselves. Loy's Italian women seem to be devoid of the *jouissance* (or even *joie de vivre*) of her French counterparts; instead, Loy portrays the former as socially enchained to their binary roles, either because of their family work (as mothers), or because of their presumed lack of it (as "mistresses" or sex workers).

### Household Work

Florentine Loy spent much time looking after her two children, Joella and Giles, albeit aided by a nurse, Giulia, and a cook, Estere (Burke 1996, 116). At the same time, she engaged in romantic and intellectual liaisons with Marinetti and Papini, as mentioned above. This engagement involved her having to confront, head on, Italian culture with its ideas about gender divisions and their role in the distribution of labour. In the poem "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots" (written in December 1914 and first published in *Rogue* in August 1915; Conover 1996, 181), Loy continues her observations of younger Italian women, and contemporaneous society's understanding of marriage as a financial transaction (Bozhkova 2019, 9). With this poem, Loy wants to insist on virginity as at once the physical and societal condition at the heart of the marriage problem. In her "Feminist Manifesto", written around the same time, Loy would go as far as to call for "the unconditional surgical destruction of virginity through-out the female population at puberty" (*LLB* 155; emphasis in original). Possibly inspired by her own failed

relationships, Loy's speaker would like to wake women up from the delusion of romantic love, and the shackles of virginity, keeping women locked in their houses:

We have been taught  
 Love is a god  
 White           with soft wings  
                   Nobody shouts  
       Virgins for sale  
 Yet where are our coins  
 For buying a purchaser  
 Love is a god  
       Marriage expensive  
                   (LLB 22 lines 30-38)

This is a poem about the economics of love, according to which marriage would only be available to women who can afford “dots” (from Latin *dos* and French *dot*), meaning dowries (Conover 1996, 181). Loy glosses the word herself in her only note to the poem, translating it as “Marriage Portions” (LLB 21), an archaic term to refer to marriage dowries. As Prescott aptly summarizes, the issue at stake in Loy’s poem is that “marriage is expensive, and paradoxically, the virgins who need the financial and social protection of marriage the most are those who can afford it least” (2016, 64). Loy points to the time-honoured construction of marriage as a financial transaction, involving an exchange of money in place of a woman’s freedom (“Virgins for sale”), a key action in Loy’s “life-traffic”. At the same time, following New Woman discourses, Loy equates the purchase of marriageable daughters to prostitution or sex work (Burstein 2012, 169-170).<sup>15</sup> Marriage is a trade, a traffic situation which, in Loy’s opinion, constructs and solidifies gender divisions, as it does not set men and women as equals from the onset. “Yet where are our coins,” asks a disillusioned woman speaker: owning, and being able to dispose of, one’s money independently ensures an ability to purchase, and a situation of equality in this transaction. But men and women, says Loy, do not appear to have been made equal, or be treated as such. Again in her “Feminist Manifesto,” she warns women against seeing themselves as exact physical and social equals to men: “deny at the outset—that pathetic clap-trap war cry **Woman is the equal of man**—/for/She is **NOT!**” (LLB 153; emphasis in original). In doing so, Loy also “channel[s] the destructive energy and anti-parliamentarianism of Futurist language” (Hobbs 2024, 337). In “Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots,” she reinstates the same idea more subtly: “We take a walk / They are going somewhere.” (LLB 21, lines 10-11). If men’s walking immediately appears to have a purpose, a direction—they are heading to work, or to visit a specific woman—, women’s walking, on the surface, seems to lack any immediate meaning or purpose, as the circularity of the leisurely “taking a walk” implies. Throughout the poem, Loy proposes the idea of houses holding young women as prisoners, who hope to be released with marriage (“Houses hold virgins / The door’s on the chain / [...] / Virgins without dots / Stare beyond probability”, LLB 21 lines 1-2, 5-6). This is an idea she reprises in “At the Door of the House” (written ca. 1915, and published in *Others: An Anthology of the New Verse*, in 1917; Conover 1996, 184), in which one of the tarot cards on “the wash-stand of the card-teller” represents the “Moons Prison-fortresses” (LLB 34, line 51). The moon, age-old symbol of femininity and of romance, becomes in Loy’s own imagined pack of tarot cards a

<sup>15</sup> See also Parmar 2013, 32.

parallel to the “prison-fortress”: the moon is only going to lead women to domestic captivity. With marriage being only a socio-economical and financial transaction, Loy’s women, instead of being released from their captivity as stay-at-home virgins, find themselves in a new form of imprisonment: household work.

One of Loy’s longest poems from her Florentine period, “The Effectual Marriage or the Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni” (written ca. 1915, and published in *Others: An Anthology of the New Verse*, in 1917; Conover 1996, 185), tackles head on the issues of domestic work, the gendered division of labour, and the confinement of the domestic space, in Loy’s typically ironic, mordant style. T. S. Eliot, who openly praised this poem by Loy in the *Egoist* (May 1918), showing to have enjoyed its potent irony of Gina and Miovanni’s role-making (Eliot 2014, 711-712), might have had Loy’s poem in mind when, a few years later, he would also be writing about the breaking down of a man-woman relationship, in “A Game of Chess” (*The Waste Land*). With Gina and Miovanni’s names making it clear that they are stand-ins for Mina Loy and Giovanni Papini, the poem undoubtedly has autobiographical roots, finding its origins in the aftermaths of Loy’s relationship with Papini.<sup>16</sup> Loy’s own personal situation in Italy changed as also that of people around her: by the summer of 1915, not only had Papini abandoned her, Italy had entered the world conflict; her husband Stephen had gone to the South Seas (Burke 1996, 140-145); her friend Mabel Dodge Luhan had moved back to New York (Burke 1996, 184); Marinetti started fighting (Burke 1996, 188), and Loy began work as a nurse at a local hospital in Florence (Burke 1996, 187). Feeling confined in her Costa San Giorgio home, Loy turned to writing about her domestic life.

In Loy’s poetic corpus, this poem is the one which most openly and most systematically refers to domestic work, and it does so in markedly gendered terms. From the start, the eponymous couple is introduced as occupying different spaces in the home in the evening, which signal their different daytime occupations:

In the evening they looked out of their two windows  
 Miovanni out of his library window  
 Gina from the kitchen window  
 From among his pots and pans  
 Where he so kindly kept her  
 Where she so wisely busied herself  
 Pots and pans                      she cooked in them  
 All sorts of sialagogues  
 Some say    that happy women are immaterial  
(LLB 36, lines 11-19)

In her poetic reassessment of her relationship with Papini, Loy reinvents herself as Gina, putting herself in the shoes of the Italian women on the street, and imagining herself as Papini/Miovanni’s companion in her own right. Given that Papini was a married man at the time of dating Loy, the normality of a couple’s domestic life, however unusual and strange in Loy’s portrayal, would not have been possible to them. The impossibility of Gina’s domestic life with Miovanni is subtly signalled in the poem by the two characters looking out of different windows, as if they were in different houses: Loy, who lived on the Costa, might have looked out of her window in the direction of Papini’s house (a five-minute walk from her), but failed to see him. Regardless of the possible additional

---

<sup>16</sup> It seems that their relationship ended in the final months of 1914, some six months before Loy started writing “Giovanni Franchi” and “The Effectual Marriage or Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni” (Burke 1996, 182-183, 201)

biographical interpretation, what is clear from Loy's poem is that Gina and Miovanni's vision of life is shaped by the rooms in the house in which they spend their time, and from whose windows they are able to look at the world. Loy relegates Gina to the kitchen space, in which she is to be found "among his pots and pans" (line 14), busy with the domestic chore of cooking and cleaning what she specifies is *his* cookware, not hers or theirs.<sup>17</sup>

Not only does the man in the couple, Miovanni, associate with the library space in the house, but he is also the one effectively 'working'. In the polarity of their relationship, Gina and Miovanni are not simply physically separated and defined by the rooms they belong to; their essence is intrinsically different and self-defining. Loy writes: "To man his work / To woman her love / Succulent meals and an occasional caress / So be it" (*LLB* 38 lines 62-64). Miovanni's purely intellectual labour is what defines him; Gina, as a woman, is defined by love, both in the sense of the love she can give to him and others via her domestic work and care, and the romantic love that makes her pine away for Miovanni. It is not simply "love" or even the love she might receive from him, "his love," but "*her* love" (my emphasis).

In this poem, Loy portrays a woman's dream of a highly gendered, divisive, domestic life with her partner, only to then harshly criticize it. As evening descends, we found Gina again at the window, making wishes:

So while he thought  
She hung out of the window  
Watching for falling stars  
And when a star fell  
She wished that still  
Miovanni would love her to-morrow  
(*LLB* 38, lines 74-79)

While Miovanni is still deep in his typical act of intellectual contemplation, Gina is engaging in romantic phantasies. When daylight breaks, Gina has resumed her duty of servitude towards her lover, ready to go to the "market[...] / With a Basket / Trimmed with a red flannel flower" (*LLB* 39, lines 105-107) and ready to deny the intellectual side of herself, writing a simple poem "on the milk bill" (line 109). As Loy draws the poem to a close, she returns, in a semi-investigative move, to the products of Gina's daytime household work ("The scrubbed smell of the white-wood table / Greasy cleanliness of the chopper board / The coloured vegetables / Intuited quality of flour" [*LLB* 39, lines 114-117]), before informing us of the unreliability of her possibly neurotic narrator, "a mad woman" (line 124-125; Crangle 2024, *Elevated Realms*, 145). With this ending, the poem culminates in a full satire of Gina, the domestically trained Italian woman lover. By suggesting the woman who inspired her narrative may be mad, the speaker distances herself from the poem's content, embittering the satire by rejecting the gendered dynamics of the man-intellectual and woman-housewife. Even as she might have identified with Gina at the beginning of the poem, she is now superior to her as she also comes to refuse everything Gina symbolizes: writing, and not domestic labour, is what defines her.

---

<sup>17</sup> As Laura Scuriatti points out, the poem reinforces the polarity of gender after Otto Weininger's *Geschlecht und Charakter* (1903; *Sex and Character*) and his "pattern of duality" (Scuriatti 2019, 43-44), which would have still been popular at the time, some ten years later.

## Conclusion

As Loy moved from Florence to New York in 1916, she also left her children, Joella and Giles, behind (Burke 1996, 194). In New York, the literary-artistic salons of the American city hail her as the Modern Woman *par excellence*: sexually and socially independent, intellectually and artistically disposed. But Loy also needed to work, no less to support her children, with whom she would be reunited again in Florence, in 1919 (Burke 1996, 275). Loy would be making clothing for her and the children (Beach 1960, 113), developed a profile as an inventor, started her lampshade business in Paris in 1923, even if with the support of Peggy Guggenheim and Laurence Vail first, and then of her son-in-law Julien Levy, painted and made collages (Conover 1982, lxxiii; Burstein 2012, 187-188). Of course, in the first half of the twentieth century it would not have been unusual for women skilled in arts and crafts to make a living out of what was typically women's work (something which would have been termed *lavori femminili* in Italian). At this point, however, she stops describing and observing the Italian (or non-Italian, for that matter) women at work around her; instead, her artwork influences her writing, sometimes directly featuring in it, as is the case for her lamps or the clothing she might have made for her children, and even the invention of her "chatoyant" material.<sup>18</sup> Instead of simply writing about the domestic work she saw other women undertake, and the gender trouble it necessarily brought about, Loy would work her manual and artistic labour into her poetry, and vice versa. Leading a life which would make her and her children, as much as possible, financially independent of others exemplified her attempt, in her poetry, to push for women's financially, socially, and emotionally independent lives—in itself, a feminist endeavour.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers for their extremely helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. Thanks are also in order to Gašper Jakovac and Trev Broughton for reading. For permission to include Mina Loy materials in this essay, I am grateful to Roger L. Conover, her editor and literary executor.

## Works cited

- Artom Treves, Giuliana. 1973. "Come Firenze diventò Florence." In *Inghilterra e Italia nel '900: atti del convegno di Bagni di Lucca, ottobre 1972*, edited by the British Institute, Florence. La nuova Italia.
- Barnard, Saskia. 2025. "Mina Loy's Brilliance." *The Cambridge Quarterly* 54 (1):1-20.
- Beach, Sylvia. 1960. *Shakespeare and Company*. Faber and Faber.
- Bozhkova, Yasna. 2019. "Cross-Cultural Baedeker: Mina Loy's Cosmopolitan Modernism." *Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone*. 16 (2). <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.7368>. Last accessed 30 October 2025.
- Burke, Carolyn. 1996. *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Burstein, Jessica. 2012. *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art*. Penn State University Press.
- Churchill, Suzanne W., Linda A. Kinnahan and Susan Rosenbaum. "En Dehors Garde". In *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde*, edited by Suzanne W. Churchill, Linda A.

---

<sup>18</sup> For more on how Loy embedded her "chatoyant" material into her own writing, see Barnard 2025, 1-20.

- Kinnahan, and Susan Rosenbaum. University of Georgia, 2020. <https://mina-loy.com/chapters/avant-garde-theory-2/the-en-dehors-garde/>. Last accessed 23 June 2025.
- Churchill, Suzanne W., Linda A. Kinnahan and Susan Rosenbaum. "Mapping Florence: First Tour, Loy at Home". In *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde*, edited by Suzanne W. Churchill, Linda A. Kinnahan, and Susan Rosenbaum. University of Georgia, 2020. <https://mina-loy.com/chapters/italy-italian-baedeker/02-oltrarno-costa/>. Last accessed 24 June 2025.
- Conover, Roger L. "Notes." 1996. In Mina Loy, *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger L. Conover. Farrar Straus Giroux.
- Conover, Roger L. "Time-Table." 1982. In Mina Loy, *The Last Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger L. Conover, with a Note by Jonathan Williams. The Jargon Society.
- Crangle, Sara. 2024. *Elevated Realms: An Anatomy of Mina Loy*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Crangle, Sara. 2024. *Nethered Regions: An Anatomy of Mina Loy*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Del Buono, Oreste, Gherardo Frassa, and Luigi Settembrini (eds.). 1987. *Gli Anglo-Fiorentini: una storia d'amore*. Edifir.
- Drouin, Diane. 2023. "Futurisme, féminisme et fluidité du genre: les manifestes de Mina Loy". In *Genres et manifestes: nouvelles perspectives sur une forme actuelle*, edited by Frédéric Regard & Anne Tomiche. Sorbonne Université Presses.
- Eliot, Thomas Stearns. 2014. *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot: The Critical Edition: Volume I, Apprentice Years, 1905-1918*, edited by Jewel Spears Brooker and Ronald Schuchard. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Forster, Edward Morgan. 1978. *A Room with a View*. Edited by Oliver Stallybrass. Penguin Books.
- Freschi, Giuliana. 2024. "From the Edge to the Heart: Female Employment in Nineteenth-Century Italy." In *Women at Work in Italy (1750-1950): Their Economic Thought and Actions*, edited by Manuela Mosca. Springer.
- Gross, Jennifer R. 2023. "Truant of Heaven: The Artist Mina Loy." In *Mina Loy: Strangeness Is Inevitable*, edited by Jennifer R. Gross. Princeton University Press.
- Hancock, Tim. 2005. "'You couldn't make it up': The Love of 'Bare Facts' in Mina Loy's Italian Poems." *English: Journal of the English Association* 54: 175-194.
- Hobbs, Katherine. 2024. "The Ineffectual Feminist?: Mina Loy and the 'Woman-Cause'." *Women's Writing* 31 (2): 332-355.
- Loy, Mina. 1996. *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger L. Conover. Farrar Straus Giroux. 1<sup>st</sup> edition.
- Luhan, Mabel Dodge. Papers. Box 24, Folder 664. In "Series I: Correspondence of Mina Loy". Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- McCarthy, Mary. 1963. *The Stones of Florence*. Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc.
- Nicholls, Peter. 2002. "'Arid clarity': Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, and Jules Laforgue." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 32: 52-64.
- Parmar, Sandeep. 2013. *Reading Mina Loy's Autobiographies: Myth of the Modern Woman*. Bloomsbury.
- Potter, Rachel, and Suzanne Hobson. 2010. "Introduction." In *The Salt Companion to Mina Loy*, edited by Rachel Potter and Suzanne Hobson. Salt Publishing.
- Prescott, Tara. 2017. *Poetic Salvage: Reading Mina Loy*. Bucknell University Press.
- Scuriatti, Laura. 2019. *Mina Loy's Critical Modernism*. University Press of Florida.

- Scuriatti, Laura. 2024. "Mina Loy's Interrupted Communities". In *Rethinking Lyric Communities*, edited by Irene Fantappiè, Francesco Giusti, and Laura Scuriatti. ICI Berlin Press.
- Shreiber, Maeera, and Keith Tuma. 1998. "Introduction." In *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*, edited by Maeera Shreiber and Keith Tuma. National Poetry Foundation.
- Van Durme, Debora. 2008. "Conjuring Melodies from Arid Air: Mina Loy and Pound's Melopoeia." *The Cambridge Quarterly* 37 (3): 324-328.
- Van Vechten, Carl. Papers. Box 76. In "Series I. Correspondence. A-Z Correspondence." Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
- Van Vechten, Carl. 1932. *Sacred and Profane Memories*. Alfred A. Knopf.