


Fall 2005

Feminism and the Art of Interpretation: Or, Reading the First Wave to Think about the Second and Third Waves

Marilyn Fischer

University of Dayton, mfischer1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub

 Part of the [Feminist Philosophy Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

eCommons Citation

Fischer, Marilyn, "Feminism and the Art of Interpretation: Or, Reading the First Wave to Think about the Second and Third Waves" (2005). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 131.

https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub/131

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact frice1@udayton.edu, mschlangen1@udayton.edu.

Feminism and the Art of Interpretation: Or, Reading the First Wave to Think about the Second and Third Waves

Marilyn Fischer

University of Dayton

Cory, my daughter, accuses me of having no thoughts of my own. I was talking with Jeremy [“Cory, what do you call him? partner? significant other? boyfriend?” “Mom, I just call him Jeremy.” Alright, then.]. Jeremy asked why I was an almost pacifist. Without even breathing, I launched into Addams’s arguments for pacifism, fully attributed to her, of course. That’s when Cory accused me of having no thoughts of my own. So, if I have no thoughts of my own, inhabiting Addams’s thoughts is not a bad substitute.

Remembering how Addams viewed much of her work as interpreting American institutions to immigrants, and interpreting the immigrant poor to middle-class Americans, I thought about a former colleague who often came to me for interpretive advice. She had been born and educated outside the United States and found Midwestern youth culture particularly baffling. One day she exploded, “Those students who slouch in the back of the classroom, baseball caps pulled over their eyes, they are so disrespectful! Are they insulting me because I am a woman of color?” How to answer this? All of the following statements are true: yes, they are insulting you in the sense that they are defying you to interest them in philosophy. But, don’t take it personally. And, yes, the fact that you are a woman of color no doubt enters into it. But then, White male colleagues report finding similar back rows in their classrooms. My advice was to rearrange the chairs into circles, squares, nested rectangles, or any configuration that eliminates back rows.

Feminists in the university need to do interpretive work and need to have interpretive work done on their behalf. Newer faculty need to have the institution interpreted to them; the university needs to have newer feminists interpreted to it.

Before launching into some observations and perplexities about interpretation, first a word about vocabulary. I started drafting this paper using the terms, “younger faculty” and “older faculty.” Then I remembered. The first woman the University of Dayton Philosophy Department hired came straight out of graduate school. She was forty-five. I started my tenure-track job at age forty-two and received tenure just shy of fifty. We were already old when we were young. Scratch an older woman faculty member, and you get a story. So, instead of “younger” and “older,” I’ll use the slightly unwieldy terms, “newer colleagues” and “more established colleagues.” In an attempt to preserve confidentiality, I’ve silently elided colleagues from my department, other departments on campus, and other universities.

I. Interpreting the University to Newer Colleagues

Describing early efforts at Hull House, Addams writes,

We early found ourselves spending many hours in efforts to secure support for deserted women, insurance for bewildered widows, damages for injured operators, furniture from the clutches of the installment store. The Settlement is valuable as an information and interpretation bureau. It constantly

acts between the various institutions of the city and the people for whose benefit these institutions were erected.¹

Newer colleagues need for us to function as information and interpretation bureaus. I wish we could experience academia through an organic process where we grow in rhythms and seasons that encourage study, experimentation, and reflection in their own good time. Instead, our profession is structured around that great divide between the tenured and the tenure-tracked, “a fact so solid...that it cast(s) a shadow over the entire landscape,” to borrow a phrase from Virginia Woolf.² If this were a longer paper, or a different paper, I would talk about the great concentrations of women faculty in the ranks of the nontenurable—the lecturers and the adjuncts. But one cannot say everything at once.³

Much of our interpreting, while ostensibly about cultivating the mind and developing pedagogical skills, is most urgently and obsessively about getting tenured. Unless your institution is fortunate to have an old-girls network (I’ve tasted one: a very well-established colleague once revealed to a committee we served on that she and I had discussed committee business in the locker room—did that ever get a “rise” from the guys!), newer colleagues need a lot of informal, and sometimes formal, information laid out for them: why it is important to keep a record of every single thing one does; how to organize materials for tenure review. Every institution is idiosyncratic, so we must do this locally and repeatedly. A more established colleague told me how feminist mentors had suggested conferences to attend and scholars at other institutions who could help her with her work. Not only are the contacts and the information vital, but this kind of attention tells us that our work is worthwhile.

When I asked a newer colleague what advice she had for her more established counterparts, she replied, “Tell them just to tell the truth.” Don’t be “nice” or “polite” (not only feminine but deeply inbred Midwestern tendencies as well). “Just tell the truth.” Some questions calling for interpretation are harder to answer, their truths harder to find. One colleague asks, “If I engage in explicit, pro-choice activism on this conservative, Catholic campus, will that hurt my chances for tenure?” Other colleagues ask advice about having a child, or a second child, before tenure. The answer, of course, is “at your peril.” The tenure system was not devised with a female body in mind, yet we must figure out how to shoehorn major life decisions within its rigid constraints. Still, it seems to me that women should have a few years’ cushion between getting up for 3 a.m. feedings and getting up for 3 a.m. hot flashes. A thirty-five-year-old colleague said, “This whole thing is terrifying. But I’m having the baby and let the chips fall where they may.” I admire her courage.

The institutional landscape shifts. The institution I faced through the tenure process is not the one my newer colleagues face. The institutional landscape I now face is not the same one they now face because of the way I and my more established feminist colleagues are embedded within it. We earned a lot of baggage coming through. Sometimes we carry it for too long; accustomed to its weight, we do not feel it dragging behind us. A newer colleague says she sometimes finds the tenured women in her department a barrier to her. They have long, painful histories with some of the men in their department, their wounds not yet sufficiently scarred over. She has to work with these men; the long-standing antagonisms make those collaborations all the more difficult. Another colleague gave me her history of anti-mentors, women who felt their own power and exceptionalism threatened by her success.

Here, Addams’s ability to sort through flawed humanity comforts me and sometimes inspires. Addams finds Tolstoy “more logical than life warrants.” Yet, reflecting on his life reminds her that “antagonism (is) a foolish and unwarrantable expenditure of energy.”⁴ Writing the *Second Twenty Years* at age seventy, Addams reflects on “the self-righteousness which so persistently dogs the feet of the sober middle-aged and the elderly and which has always wrought its share of havoc.”⁵ I find her capacity for continual self-reflection inspiring; I find her ability for continual self-doubt a more productive pattern for living than the quest for certainty. I continue to try to tell the truth, aware all the while that truth, too, is an ever-evolving project.

II. Interpreting Newer Colleagues to the University

Presenting immigrants as intelligible and intelligent to those outside the neighborhood was one of Hull House’s many functions. Addams writes, “Whatever other services the settlement may have endeavored to perform for its community, there is not doubt that it has come to regard interpreting the foreign colonies to the rest of the city in the light of professional obligation.”⁶

Interpreting the newer colleagues to the university is tricky; in some ways they have it easier than I and my peers did, in some ways harder. Newer colleagues tell me that it is easier now because feminist philosophy is more recognized and considered more legitimate than, say, two decades ago. They can present papers at feminist conferences, publish in feminist journals, seek suggestions on SWIP and FEAST listservs. My department is feminist friendly to a fair extent. In reviewing job candidates for an ethics position, I look through each writing sample, graduate transcript, and syllabus. If I see nothing to indicate awareness and use of feminist ethics perspectives, I tell the hiring committee that this person does not indicate knowledge of a vital part of the field, and my colleagues agree that that is a problem.

Feminist activism has been around long enough that sometimes to interpret newer colleagues to the university, we do not have to rely on institutional virtues such as equality, fairness, or respect for human dignity but can appeal to plain old self-interest. We can tell the university it is downright embarrassing that we do not have an adequate parental leave policy in place. It is one of the things job candidates ask about in job interviews, vocally and quickly. We are losing good candidates because of it.

Knotty perplexities remain. In light of what criteria do we interpret our newer colleagues to the institution? Coming through the tenure track process, I was advised to “write my Rawls paper,” if only to show that I could. I did write my Rawls paper, along with my business ethics papers on accounting fraud. I suspect that made my Addams work more tolerable, as I had proven that I could do “real” philosophy. So, now, some years later, do I encourage my newer colleagues to write their metaphorical Rawls papers? It is “realistic” in light of current criteria to do so. I worry about squelching my newer colleagues’ verve, their creativity, their determination to cultivate their own voices and styles, which, God knows, we desperately need. I worry about perpetuating criteria that need revision. Unrevised, these standards embody methodologies and sensibilities of men, such as those Annette Baier so memorably described in the field of ethics as “a collection of clerics, misogynists and puritan bachelors,” men who had had “minimal adult dealings with women.”⁷ One’s philosophizing is informed by one’s imagination, one’s imagination by life experiences.

This struggle is most intense during promotion, tenure review, and hiring meetings. That is when people cannot hide

their perceptions and prejudices about what philosophy is, what counts as good or bad scholarship, what counts as innovative versus irresponsible teaching. Often I hear, “That’s interesting, but is it philosophy?” a perennial question that is debated in every generation and changes with every generation. When I started working on Addams, I did not let myself ask that question, figuring that as long as I found her intriguing, I would not worry about it. Several others unknown to me were similarly intrigued, and I am mightily grateful to Charlene Haddock Seigfried, an undisputedly legitimate philosopher, for championing Addams and encouraging me.

Feminist scholarship that stretches the meaning and methods of philosophy frightens the keepers of the standards. In 1974, Karen Warren began her dissertation on ascribing legal right to natural objects. She reports that to her department, “It was crowning evidence that my commitment to philosophy was seriously lacking and that my future as a philosopher was bleak.”⁸ Would that all of us had careers as bleak as Karen, now a leading scholar of environmental ethics and ecofeminism. Recently, a newer scholar included an essay on breast reduction surgery (her own) in her tenure review materials. Her committee could not even name the topic out loud, much less assess the essay’s philosophical significance. The struggle continues on.

First wave feminists tell us what is at stake. In her typical fashion of using others’ voices to convey her own point of view, Addams tells of a judge trying to apply common law to labor disputes. She describes his concern that “it must be interpreted, not so much in relation to precedents established under a judicial order which belongs to the past, but in reference to that newer sense of justice which this generation is seeking to embody in industrial relations.”⁹ We owe it to our newer colleagues to embody “that newer sense of justice” into academic standards.

Virginia Woolf is more direct. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf asks, on what terms will the daughters of educated men enter the professions?

We are here to consider facts. And the facts which we have just extracted from biography (of professional men) seem to prove that the professions have a certain undeniable effect upon the professors. They make the people who practice them possessive, jealous of any infringement of their rights, and highly combative if anyone dares dispute them. Are we not right then in thinking that if we enter the same professions we shall acquire the same qualities? And do not such qualities lead to war? In another century or so if we practise the professions in the same way, shall we not be just as possessive, just as jealous, just as pugnacious, just as positive as to the verdict of God, nature, Law and Property as these gentlemen are now?¹⁰

The lives of all of us are at stake.

And sometimes we lose. As I tired of the pre-divorce stage of bending myself into a pretzel so as to meet his objections to my ways of being, thinking, and sensing, I suddenly realized that no matter what I did, I would lose. I could not make myself acceptable to him. At that point, I was free. It came as a great relief to know that I would lose; I was then free to make my own way. In times like these, the options switch. Instead of winning or losing, one can either be outrageous or fade. Both options have their points; both make sense at different times.

Addams’s reflections console. Near the end of her chapter on the bumpy path toward labor legislation reform, she writes,

“Perhaps that sort of suffering and the attempt to interpret opposing forces to each other will long remain a function of the Settlement, unsatisfactory and difficult as the role often becomes.”¹¹ When my protests seem in vain, the call for a fairer justice unheard, even then, at least I am at the table; I bear witness. They know that what is said must be said in my presence.

III. Interpretation as Action

In an early piece, Addams writes that one of her motives for founding Hull House was “the desire to interpret democracy in social terms.”¹² For Addams, democracy is far more than a form of political machinery, it is a matter of how we live in families, neighborhoods, and workplaces. Her desire to interpret democracy in social terms was a desire to live out democracy in concrete, everyday experience. This is interpretation as action. Through working on shared projects, we not only accomplish concrete tasks, we also build solidarity and come to appreciate and compensate for each others’ peculiarities. The process itself is educative and creates knowledge.

I sat down and made a list of what our mutual projects are:

- to enable us all to lead flourishing lives;
- to transform the curriculum;
- to transform institutions;
- to transform knowledge;
- to transform the world.

Admittedly, a daunting task. I was still dizzy when I opened the fundraising appeal from the American Friends Service Committee. (Just for the sake of keeping things tidy, note that Addams collaborated with the group frequently.) Right near the top, before “Dear Friend,” was a quote from the Talmud. “Look ahead. You are not expected to complete the task. Neither are you permitted to lay it down.” There it is. Understanding and responsibility placed right next to each other.

To establish herself as a credible interpreter, Addams lived among the immigrants as a neighbor, not as a charity worker. She stressed that if she lived with them in good times, then she would understand them and could help when times were tough. Pat Johnson, my wise, established colleague at the University of Dayton for over twenty-five years, told me much the same thing. You need to be political, she said, in the sense of knowing how to maneuver within one’s institution in a way that serves women’s needs. You need to sense when to push, when to lay back. You need to work with nonfeminists collegially on their projects to show them that their concerns have value. You need to acquire intimate knowledge of how your own, idiosyncratic institution works, and to build relations of trust. This will give you the credibility and the ability to interpret newer colleagues’ needs and strengths to nonfeminist colleagues and, with them, make the institution more responsive. Because Pat is there for the duration, she has seen, if not conversions, then at least some turning of the curves over the long term, as some male colleagues came to believe that hiring more women faculty is a genuine priority, that a women’s center would be a serviceable thing.

Pat also observed that we, the more established ones, need to sense when to back off, when to let others take over projects that are dear to us, even when we think we can do them better. In *Second Twenty Years*, Addams notes, “There is always a chance that the garnered wisdom of the old may turn out to be no wisdom at all.”¹³ In “Unplanned Obsolescence,”

Sandra Bartky wonders if she is becoming intellectually obsolete.”¹⁴ Of course, Addams and Bartky are both outrageously wrong about themselves, but I think it advisable to wear their concerns lightly, as checks on our own earnestness.

My first dozen or so times through *Twenty Years at Hull House*, I read the book as Addams’s expression of Progressive Era optimism. My blinders were well fixed and Addams’s rhetorical genius blinkered me. The book is more sober than its reputation, and thus useful for sober times. Today, as conservative moralists and corporate capitalists make feminists’ work difficult, we still hold onto the Talmud’s dictum: though unable to complete the task, we do not lay it down. Addams’s reflections give us paths for wending our way through these times with sensitivity and grace.

Endnotes

1. Jane Addams. *Twenty Years at Hull House* (1910) (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 113.
2. Virginia Woolf. *Three Guineas* (1938) (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc., 1966), 5.
3. See Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s discussion of this issue in *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 179.
4. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 179.
5. Jane Addams. *Second Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 200.
6. Jane Addams, “Chicago Settlements and Social Unrest,” *Charities*, XX (May 1908): 115.
7. Annette Baier. “Trust and Antitrust.” In *Moral Prejudices: Essays on Ethics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 114.
8. Karen Warren. “Getting Here from There.” In *Singing in the Fire: Stories of Women in Philosophy*, edited by Linda Matin Alcoff (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 160.
9. Jane Addams. *Newer Ideals of Peace* (1907) (Bristol, UK: Thoemmes Press, 2003), 61.
10. Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 66.
11. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 151.
12. Addams, *Twenty Years*, 86.
13. Addams, *Second Twenty Years*, 4.
14. Sandra Lee Bartky. “Unplanned Obsolescence: Some Reflections on Aging.” In *Sympathy and Solidarity and Other Essays* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 198-200.