

## Profile

# Marjorie, Matriarchy, and “Wretched Reflection”: A Personal Remembrance of Marjorie Grene

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*That's wretched. I don't want to think about who I am!*

— Marjorie Grene, Interview with Benjamin R. Cohen,  
*The Believer*, March 2009

In biological terms, the word “matriarch” is associated with a particular kind of social organization, one where the female serves as leader of the group. For those keen on the natural world, it oftentimes conjures up a huge, lumbering elephant, gently guiding and protecting her progeny with her trunk, followed by a group of female relatives and adolescents (while all the while, the males are off being “rogue”). But the word in its Greek origination holds a deeper meaning, devoid of elephants or even of the social organization of any animals. It comes from the word *mater*, for mother, and *archein*, a difficult word to define that can mean origin, beginning, or even rule or principle, as in first principle. Immediately translated, the word matriarch means a mother—a woman—who serves simultaneously as originator, ruler, guide, or perhaps the source of being or point of origination. It is gendered to be sure, but that makes it even more appropriate for my remembrance of Marjorie.

For many of us at the International Society for History, Philosophy, and Social Studies of Biology (ISHPSSB), Marjorie Grene served as a matriarch—a guide, a leader, the inspiration, *the* beginnings of our society. She was in fact in it from the start, not just in her intellectual efforts (more about that later) but also in organizing the first set of meetings at Cornell University with Dick Burian in the early 1980s that eventually paved the way for the creation of ISHPSSB. She, incidentally, called it the “multi-lettered, multi-presidented society” because of its awkward name and because so many

people were honored as presidents (including Marjorie) at its inception.

I attended the summer meetings organized by Marjorie and Dick, mostly because of the stunning list of luminaries. As a graduate student in ecology and evolutionary biology, keen on paleobotany, I was just too dazzled by the likes of Stephen J. Gould and Niles Eldredge to remember much else (this was at the peak of “punk eek” mania), but I do vaguely recall Marjorie and Dick sitting together in rickety wooden chairs near the front row in a room absolutely crowded with bodies. It was later, in the winter months, that I finally met Marjorie, face to face, in Karl Niklas’s office. They were meeting regularly to read Willi Hennig’s work—then all the rage—in German. As my doctoral advisor, Karl wanted me to meet someone he described as a “legend in her own time.” I vividly remember that meeting—she was seated in a chair immediately opposite him looking like a caricature of the eternal Radcliffe graduate, or a character out of an Iris Murdoch novel from the 1950s: short hair, plaid pleated skirt, black turtleneck, sensible shoes. So small, that she had to raise her arms to pick up their reading material from his desk, Marjorie seemed to disappear into her chair. This was deceptive, I quickly realized, as her voice boomed in fake indignation at hearing herself described in such an unimaginative cliché. She railed at him for some time, all with affection, of course, but then just as quickly focused her attention on me, asking about my research interests. She took an avid interest in younger people, especially women, a characteristic that has benefited many of us who were lucky enough to know Marjorie as young people.

Her real interest became even more apparent, when a year or so later, I told her that I had turned to the history of science, and that I had chosen to work on the subject of botany and the evolutionary synthesis, thanks to the tutelage of Will Provine. A campus visit by George Ledyard Stebbins in 1986 practically sealed our friendship, since he was Marjorie’s *close* friend (her description, not mine). Visiting Cornell for some three weeks to deliver a series of lectures, Ledyard sought out Marjorie for good company. As his appointed “guide” (I was put in

charge of hosting him for the period), I was lucky to be invited to their lunches, dinners, and outings. That’s when I first saw Marjorie’s warmth and eagerness to please her friends. She was a magnificent host—a wonderful cook, a sparkling conversationalist, and attentive to her guest’s every need. An evening with Marjorie in her comfy home was magical—you never knew who would be seated next to you, and what extraordinary story about some hugely famous person you would hear. Despite her scholarly reputation as a heavyweight, Marjorie was a hopeless “people person”—keen on sharing memories and gossip just as much as she enjoyed sharing reading lists and ideas. Marjorie loved Ledyard, I learned through all that, because he was the one who “converted” her to evolution during their years at the University of California at Davis. At the time, I had no idea that Marjorie needed such “conversion,” or that she had anything of “a past” devoid of her interests in evolution, because she seemed a permanent fixture in Cornell’s evolutionary community: she was a friend of faculty, attended all available seminars in the Section of Ecology and Systematics, and occasionally even gave a course or two.

I had actually taken one of those in the fall of 1987, and literally jumped at the chance, even though I was deeply into writing my doctoral dissertation, which by then had become a biographical study of her friend, Ledyard (she approved of that decision heartily and shared her insights into Ledyard and the Davis scene every chance I gave her). As I reflect on it, the course she gave in 1987 was a dream course—“Darwin and 19th Century Philosophy.” She was keen on understanding Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* in the context of the philosophies of science articulated by William Whewell and John Herschel. Over the course of the semester, we read the *Origin*, line by line, stopping to comment or discuss particularities and possible interpretations. I still have that copy of the *Origin*, all marked, dog-eared and torn, and use it for leading my own class discussions of the book. There were only six people in that class: two of us were graduate students (the other was Mary Bartley, another history of biology doctoral student then working on a history of sexual selection), while the remaining four were average Cornell undergraduates. Clueless about Darwin, the *Origin*, philosophy, or who their teacher was, they just sat there and seemed only to come to life when Marjorie started railing at something, usually at a casual remark made by someone in passing. That wasn’t always pleasant. Her criticism was withering. She wasn’t quite

sure what to do with undergraduates, and dealt with anything she perceived as nonsense by shutting down discussion completely usually with a cutting remark; Marjorie just didn’t have the patience to deal with all this undergraduate stuff. To them, she could be devastating, and they took it out on her with their teaching evaluations at the end of the semester, which were far meaner and more personal than anything she had said in class. I found it fascinating; the more she railed, the more intriguing it got, especially after I realized there was a pattern to what set her off—most everything that I had learned from L. Pearce Williams, the resident expert on the 18th- and 19th-century European intellectual history with an emphasis on France. Marjorie’s critical comments weren’t actually personal, but directed toward particular kinds of understanding of the European intellectual tradition, the kind that Pearce and his predecessor Henry Guerlac had been teaching students of the

history of science for decades at Cornell, and which stressed the view that science was embedded in Western culture (see Williams and Steffens 1968). And her real bugaboo, I realized, was René Descartes, who Pearce and Guerlac taught as being as crucial—absolutely crucial—to understanding the Western intellectual tradition. Both also stressed the importance of historiographic reflection and the *art*, rather than the *science* of history. Pearce was especially adamant that history was part of the humanities and took umbrage at any suggestion that it was a science that could be understood in anything other than literary, interpretive, or humanistic terms.<sup>1</sup> Marjorie,



Marjorie at Monticello, 1989. Photo by Betty Smocovitis.

I realized, had no time for all that—any such reflection was “wretched” (her word) and any focus on history as interpretive or literary practice, any prolonged discussion of historiography, or any mention of historiographers like Hayden White, whom she thought especially “confused,” made her go ballistic. She really didn’t participate in the formal activities of the new history and philosophy of science and technology program he started (and in fact often referred to him as that “awful” man, especially after she learned he was the campus conservative),<sup>2</sup> besides, she had other “giants” of philosophy she looked to, like Aristotle, the preferred philosopher of many biologists (that’s an understatement, for sure), and her real interests were more compatible with Cornell’s rich biological sciences programs, which were happy to have her.<sup>3</sup>

So much for the “great thoughts of dead white men!” Marjorie and I could argue about understanding them until we were blue in the face, but we also had other lives and shared

interests and hard work we had to do. She took me for lunch and tea, and held my hand as I wrote my dissertation, which she continued to support. She shared her insights, reading lists, and eagerly read everything that I wrote. I can still remember her delight when the offer from the University of Florida came through. “You’ll have to get away, of course” (meaning by that, that I’d have to fly out a lot or else go brain-dead in the swamp), “but it’s a wonderful job!” she beamed. She knew from personal experience how rough it got for unemployed scholars, especially if they were women.

We ended up both making transitions to new homes at about the same time—she leaving Ithaca for Blacksburg, when Ruth, her daughter, who she affectionately called “Rufus” (and yes, she had red hair), secured a position at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute. It took no time for the invitation to visit her at her new home came through. It was a modest and simple home, with quiet elegance, much like Marjorie, but it had a glorious view of a mountain range on one side. She had an extra window cut into that wall, just so she could sit in her favorite chair and enjoy the view. I can still picture her sitting there, enjoying that view, next to a table with books and the latest journals and newspapers like the *New York Review of Books* piled high. She had me stay there for some time, having parties and receptions, and outings, showing a warmth and hospitality that seemed at odds with her public reputation for harshness. Her eagerness to please her friends came through when she organized a long weekend outing in nearby Charlottesville. Marjorie wanted to show me Monticello and the University of Virginia, and made it an especially memorable tour—I can still hear her voice as she pointed out with her usual glee where “Mr. Jefferson kept his slave mistress,” as she took me around the historic buildings and gardens. It couldn’t have been easy for her; she was in her late seventies at the time, in good shape, but also relying heavily on a cane to walk; she never complained the entire time, but walked along slowly showing the sights and sharing whatever bits of delicious historical gossip came to mind.

That tour would have been memorable in itself, but Marjorie had something even better in store—a long weekend with her good friends, the Rorty’s. It was exciting, for sure, but what remains memorable about that weekend was what it revealed about Marjorie. What set her off the most was the new literary theory, and the “literary” turn then making its way into every nook and cranny of the humanities—thanks, in large measure to Richard Rorty himself. She hated that literary turn, *hated it . . .* with a vengeance! Any discussion that turned to the subject was quickly squelched, as Marjorie sputtered words like “awful” and “wretched” with every vowel extended in pronunciation, but the words themselves clipped from each other, and transmitted to their receivers as if in some kind of telegraphic code. But here’s the interesting thing: despite a huge disagreement in philosophy, Marjorie remained close to Richard and his wife Mary; and indeed, she revelled

in his success as a philosopher and even tried to cheer him up that weekend after Richard’s spirits plummeted after the appearance of a dismissive review of his new book, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Rorty 1989), in that Sunday’s *New York Times Book Review*. Bad influence on a junior scholar he might be, but she still wanted me to meet him because she knew it was something that would be pleasing to both of her friends.

It was a fun weekend, filled with good food, great conversations, and even a memorable shopping trip with Marjorie and Mary (I still have my Turkish kilims as souvenirs of that). But the best part of that weekend was the image of Marjorie angrily pulling back the covers to the sofa bed in Richard’s study. Dressed in a long nightgown in a dimly lit, shadowed room, she looked like something out of a Gothic novel as she threw up her arms, pointed to the bookcases plastered along the walls and shouted “how can I possibly sleep in this room with all these *awful* books written by *awful* people!” She was actually pointing to the shelf with the books of one Stanley Fish. (Aside: I’ve always thought it would make a great Gary Larson-like cartoon with philosophers instead of the usual biological subjects, captioned as “Marjorie Grene: Sleepless in Richard Rorty’s Study.”)

In short, Marjorie was a lot of fun—a thunderbird on the totem pole of philosophy, for sure, but she also loved life, her friends, and making people happy. My own relationship to her took a surprising turn a couple of years later. She had just visited me in Palo Alto, California and I had customarily given her my latest scribbling. It was the first draft of *Unifying Biology* (Smocovitis 1992, 1996). I’ll never forget her reaction, which came in the way of a long-distance telephone call days later, more like a long-distance howl actually, that went something like “Betty, take me out of that manuscript! I don’t want to be included with those *awful* people, and if you don’t, I’ll sue you.” This sounded serious. What exactly had I done to set her off, this time? All that I had done was to locate Marjorie in the archives at the University of Chicago, in the papers for the “unity of science” movement deposited there—along with Rudolf Carnap, Charles Morris, and Otto Neurath—was this so *awful*? She had gone there to participate in Carnap’s circle, didn’t she? And all I had done was to suggest, emphasis on suggest, a link between logical positivism and the philosophy of biology and to point out how deeply engaged in the movement she had once been. True, I also pointed out that she was the author of not just one, but two papers that challenged the scientific status of evolutionary theory in the 1950s (Grene 1959), but all this was part of the published historical record, right? Was there something actually *wrong* with writing down what I had found in the archival record about her intellectual development? What could possibly be so damaging about that?

Her reaction to finding herself historicized—so to speak—and other questions that I had put to her over the years answered, made me realize that Marjorie didn’t enjoy dealing

with the past, and certainly not her own intellectual past. It wasn't secretiveness or subterfuge—Marjorie believed life was to be lived forward, to evoke Kierkegaard's famous quotation (she also hated him, incidentally), but looking backward just didn't get her very far. Worse, there was way too much disappointment, especially in the personal realm for her to “go there” *too* much, though it didn't trouble her to let people know on occasion, that she had been variously both an unemployed and underemployed philosopher, a farmer, and an aggrieved wife, all in various stages of her life. But she was much quieter about her early philosophical interests, which remained nearly a blank to me, for what seemed a long time; they just never came up in *any* of our many conversations.

As a courtesy, I did “write her out of the story,” but I remained interested in knowing more about her. I continued to probe, finding out much about Marjorie's own intellectual background. I was astonished to learn that she formally studied with Martin Heidegger before she went to the University of Chicago to work with Rudolf Carnap and Carl Hempel. She had been associated closely with some of the giants in European philosophical circles—Karl Jaspers and Michael Polanyi—all parts of her past life, before she rediscovered Aristotle, in so doing completing one of the great intellectual biographies in the history of philosophy (Grene, 1963). Marjorie's intellectual circles, in fact, resembled a veritable “who's who” of the 20th-century European philosophers—no wonder she claimed “conversion” to evolution by colleagues and friends like Ledyard Stebbins. Her interest in modern evolutionary biology came well after the mid-point of a very long and productive career in philosophy, though as someone who has looked at the development of her intellectual career, I'd actually argue vigorously that elements of it were always there, given that her initial interest as Wellesley undergraduate was in zoology. Marjorie's intellectual trajectory actually makes sense if one recognizes that she was interested in biology from the start; her forays into philosophy were a way of preparing for her return to biology, after she had sorted through the “problematic” part of it, namely evolutionary theory (she later admitted that her initial understanding was incomplete). Indeed, her knowledge of philosophical currents of thought in the 20th century was first-hand; she actually *lived* through many of them and that made her a quick—and ferocious—critic once she was ready to move on. All of this was brought to bear with her novel reading of Aristotle, and her return to biology, whose philosophy she could articulate and defend with astonishing erudition (my reading here has benefited from hindsight, for sure, but my sense is that the biologist in Marjorie was always there).

I continued to learn much about Marjorie after that, but the phone calls became more sporadic as age and infirmity set in. She continued to follow my work with a combination of interest, affection, amusement, and more than a bit of frustration.

I learned that she enjoyed my *Osiris* article that examined the happenings at the 1959 Darwin Centennial. She considered it “fun” because she knew most of the participants, many of whom were her friends, and had enjoyed reading about some of the antics of people in the story (the “people person” again). She also thought it was clearly written; clarity of prose was something that Marjorie admired and strove for in her own work, so any favorable remark on writing was a great compliment. That strange mixture of alternating praise and criticism, sometimes in what appeared unpredictable combinations, were the kinds of contradictory elements that pretty well defined Marjorie's relations to her friends. I think they were also simultaneously critical to understanding her personality—for every “wretched” word uttered, there was an equal and opposite “wonderful,” another word she used liberally.

Let me close my personal remembrance of Marjorie by pointing out the obvious to anyone who knew her: she'd be the first to say “Oh, stop it, that's enough reminiscing about me—let's talk about something else!” Warm and generous and as sympathetic as she could be, she would have hated *too* much fuss made about her—Marjorie disliked overly sentimental or fulsome praise. She wasn't comfortable with it and that is likely why her response to being queried about her designation as the 29th philosopher and first woman in the Library of Living Philosophers Series (Auxier and Hahn 2002) was to state dryly that “they must be looking desperately for a woman,”<sup>4</sup> as though this was the only reason why her life-work deserved recognition. She'd also really dislike any suggestion that she was a matriarch, a female leader—she'd view it as complete nonsense or a “silly” reference (yet another one of her favorite terms of opprobrium). What *would* please her is seeing her friends come together casually at meetings and continuing the work she started in the philosophy of biology. Marjorie's legacy continues in the ISHPSSB, not just in the Grene Prize she sponsored, which is dedicated to recognizing the work of younger people, but with every meeting. It is a fitting tribute, therefore, to remember Marjorie and her many contributions, but to move on with our work, push ourselves just a bit harder, and continue to foster the education of younger people.

## Notes

1. Williams later correctly saw himself as one of the first cultural historians of science, though he initially resisted the “new” intellectual/cultural history of the 1980s.
2. The philosophers exited that program in the late 1980s very shortly after it was created. It gained departmental status in the early 1990s but was reconfigured as Cornell's existing Science and Technology Studies.
3. For more on Marjorie Grene's pet peeves like “wretched reflection,” see the illuminating interview with Benjamin R. Cohen in *The Believer*, March 2005, available at [http://www.believermag.com/issues/200503/?read=interview\\_grene](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200503/?read=interview_grene)
4. Interview with B. R. Cohen; see note 3.

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