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Pythagoras' Trousers: God, Physics, and the Gender Wars: A Review

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Margaret Wertheim, *Pythagoras' Trousers: God, Physics, and the Gender Wars*. New York: Random House, Times, 1995.

Reviewed by Alexandra Tyler

Margaret Wertheim has offered a fascinating and accurate portrayal of the position of women in the sciences, with particular regard for the status of women in physics. Moreover, she has done so by way of tracing out the historical problematics and developments in physics within the overall larger picture of the rise of science in early modernity, as well as ancient and modern disciplines. In addition, she has done so in a fashion which allows the lay person to follow her work without needing a specific scholarly background. However, this does not mean that she neglects background source material; quite the contrary. She evinces a unique gift for taking difficult subject matters and making them of interest to the scholar, as well as available to the lay person.

Her main thesis, briefly summarized, is the following. She contends, quite properly, that the science of physics has been dominated by a certain urge towards a "theory of everything," which parallels the quest for religious transcendence so evident in the socio-political context of our lives. In other words, modern day physics exhibits a religious desire to account for the totality of the universe, explain it, and thereby become closer to God. Moreover, she asserts that such projects utilize great sums of money in a socially irresponsible fashion, money that would be better spent on the concrete needs of the society and the planet.

Indeed, as she asserts, this is not an unproblematic quest. The place for women in the science of physics had been systematically denied by the tradition of such a science. Broadly speaking, she shows the manner in which women have been strongly excluded from the pursuit of physics (unlike the tenuous openings for women in other sciences such as biology or chemistry) by a historical overview of primary sources ranging from the ancient world to the modern day era. It is precisely the fact that women cannot transcend and become close to God which dis-allows them to pursue physics, a transcendental science *par excellence*. Women, considered as closer to nature, embodied and lacking the capacity for intellectual talent, are, necessarily, within the tradition and, even today, prevented or discouraged from engaging in the pursuit of physics.

This book is important in its own right, as well as a work which should be considered important in many different disciplines, among them the sciences, as well as the humanities. This book would also be useful for young women and men who plan to pursue physics in a new and different way, those whom Wertheim calls the "new mathematical women and men".

I have three minor criticisms of this book. The first regards the lack of documentation regarding the presence of women in the sciences and in physics. Graphs or literature with regard to that point would have been helpful and interesting.

The second criticism involves the lack of scholarly documentation. It would be helpful for the reader to know precisely from which sources various citations come. Lastly, Ms. Wertheim might also have noted that the denigration of the presence of women in the discipline of physics, while perhaps stronger than in other disciplines, also exists, unfortunately, in other academic disciplines, and indeed in the academy as a whole.