

The Pomegranate

Readers' Forum

Please contribute to our Readers' Forum so that we may continue to present this valuable venue for the exchange of ideas. Letters may be edited to conserve space or to avoid repetition. Writers of published letters will have their subscriptions extended.

CYNTHIA ELLER WRITES:

Dear Editor,

Thanks again to *The Pomegranate* for its extensive review coverage of my recent book, *The Myth of Matriarchal Prehistory*. Thanks especially to Brian Hayden for saying that it is “a short book that will make tall waves.” This was very flattering, and particularly rewarding since the book only ended up being short via much blood, sweat, and tears (the original manuscript was nine hundred pages long).

As Prof Hayden points out, we differ mainly in our assessment of the existence and relevance of significant, predictable, cross-cultural differences between women and men. I don't think we are as far apart as Hayden suggests though. I realize that I stated my case somewhat hyperbolically in chapter 4 of my book, but I think a careful reading of it (and chapter 9) makes it clear that I do not claim that sex differences do not exist. I'm more concerned with their relevance (or lack of same). The fact is, most purported sex differences have not been adequately documented yet. But I'm willing to accept that this is a failure in precise scientific measurement of such things rather than an ontological statement regarding women's and men's essential sameness. I'd even go so far as to say (for anyone who cares about my personal opinion, which is all it is) that I

think it is *probable* that there are significant, predictable, cross-cultural differences between women and men *as classes of people*. However, I think that there is questionable utility—and a lot of preexisting ideological motivation—in undertaking sex difference research.

In reaction to the racist excesses of the last couple of centuries, race difference research has recently become extremely suspect. For the most part, it is just not done these days (except in areas where there is an obvious, practical benefit to doing so; for example, in medicine, where racial predisposition to specific diseases may be an important factor in proper treatment). I see no reason to believe *prima facie* that there are no significant, predictable, cross-cultural racial differences. But I, and most Americans, think it is pernicious at this time in history to try to find out what they are. Given our very painful history of using race difference research to justify racism, we're being careful these days. We should be.

We are not so careful around questions of sex difference. From governmentally-funded sex difference research to the plethora of self-appointed authorities writing books in the ever-popular Venus/Mars genre, one can make all sorts of ridiculous, unsubstantiated generalizations about men and women (or “masculine” and “feminine,” which elide effortlessly into the former) and never raise an eyebrow by doing so. Even sex difference research that is appropriately modest in its claims tends to be interpreted in the broadest, most overstated way by the popular media. We are altogether too ready to ferret out sex differences big and small, supposedly for the sake of “knowledge,” when what we are really about is an excuse to treat women and men differently—and usually in familiar sexist ways—in both public and private life.

In short, exploring sex differences through ethnography, sociology, psychology, neurology, or any other branch of science is not in princi-

ple misguided. But we have no reason to trust ourselves to do it responsibly *right now*. Indeed, we have ample reason to suspect that even when we think we are enquiring into potential sex differences in a responsible, open-ended way, we are really just nailing more planks onto a deeply sexist structure.

It's time to step back and give the endless rhetoric of sex difference a rest. Maybe one day we will be able to conduct research that demonstrates that women are more nurturing than men without immediately construing this as a justification for leaving women overwhelmingly responsible for childcare. And maybe one day we will be able to conduct research that demonstrates that persons with African ethnic roots are more likely to have good rhythm than persons with European ethnic roots without thinking that blacks belong in vaudeville shows and whites in corporate boardrooms. But we're not there now. And until we are, caution should be the order of the day. I don't think we lose anything for now—and we stand to gain much—by throwing out the baby of sex difference with the bathwater of sexism: at least until we can trust ourselves to discriminate between the two. I'm thinking that's going to be awhile, in which case it is well worth our time to figure out ways to think and act during the interim that don't rely so much on generalizations about who women and men fundamentally are.

Sincerely,
Cynthia Eller

RAVEN GRIMASSI WRITES:

Dear Pomegranate,

I read the article "Spells, Saints, and *Streghe*: Witchcraft, Folk Magic, and Healing in Italy" (*Pomegranate* #13) with great interest and would like to make some comments regarding it. I feel I should preface my comments by stating I'm one of the authors whose work was examined by Professor Magliocco in her well

written article. Although my books *Ways of the Strega* and *Hereditary Witchcraft* were not written with scholarly review in mind, it was interesting to discover what a scholar drew from my material. I had the pleasure to personally meet with Professor Magliocco after the article was written, and to discuss with her my views regarding Italian witchcraft. It is unfortunate that our meeting did not take place prior to the writing of her article so as to provide Magliocco with a fuller understanding of my approach in presenting my books on Italian witchcraft.

In her article, Magliocco states I present "Italian witchcraft as consisting of three traditions: the northern Italian *Fanarra* and the central *Janarra* and *Tanarra*". While it is true that I focus on these traditions, it is a misunderstanding of my writings to conclude that I claim they are representative of "Italian witchcraft" as a whole throughout Italy. What I do claim is that these traditions (originally one system known as the Triad Tradition) divided and settled in various regions of Italy where they remained relatively intact over the centuries. Such a concept is not without precedence in the literature of Italian witchcraft. Author J.B. Andrews (*Folk-Lore; Transactions of the Folk-Lore Society*, March 1897) wrote that the witches of Naples are divided into "special departments of the art". He lists two as adepts in the art of sea magic and earth magic. Later in the article he implies that a third specialty may exist related to the stars.

Accounts such as Andrew's report are admittedly not widespread in the study of Italian witchcraft. Magliocco states that her approach is to "look for multiple documentation of the existence and meaning of a custom in order to confirm its widespread practice, rather than relying upon a single informant's report". While this seems a very safe method, I feel it may unintentionally dismiss key
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