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Middlesex and the Intersex Body: Rewriting Gender in Contemporary American Fiction

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Abstract

Jeffrey Eugenides's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Middlesex* (2002) narrates the life of Cal Stephanides, who is raised as a girl before recognizing, in adolescence, an intersex condition inherited through a recessive gene passed down across three generations of a Greek immigrant family. This article examines how *Middlesex* uses Cal's intersex embodiment to interrogate the constructed and historically contingent nature of binary sex and gender categories in contemporary American culture. Situating the novel within the history of American medical management of intersex bodies, particularly the surgical "normalization" paradigm associated with the sexologist John Money, the article argues that *Middlesex* stages a direct critique of medical authority over bodily ambiguity. Reading the novel alongside Michel Foucault's introduction to the memoirs of *Herculine Barbin*—a text Cal explicitly reads within the narrative—and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, the article further argues that Cal's first-person narration enacts gender as an authored, retrospective construction rather than a discovered essence. The final section considers critiques from intersex studies scholarship that caution against reading intersex embodiment primarily as literary metaphor, arguing that *Middlesex*'s significance lies precisely in how it holds these competing concerns in tension.

Keywords: American literature, intersex studies, queer theory, gender performativity, Jeffrey Eugenides, Michel Foucault, Judith Butler

Introduction

When Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2003, it brought a literary account of intersex embodiment to an unusually wide American readership. The novel is narrated by Cal Stephanides, who recounts, from adulthood, having been raised as a girl named Calliope before discovering, at fourteen, that he has 5-alpha-reductase deficiency, an intersex condition caused by a recessive genetic mutation that had passed

undetected through three generations of his Greek immigrant family. Cal's discovery of his condition, prompted by a physical injury and a subsequent examination by a sexologist modelled closely on real mid-century American clinicians, forces both the character and the reader to confront how American medicine in the second half of the twentieth century responded to bodies that did not fit neatly into binary categories of male and female.

Eugenides tells this personal history against the sweep of twentieth-century American immigrant experience: Cal's grandparents flee the Greco-Turkish population exchange of the 1920s, settle in Detroit, and pass the recessive mutation to their son and, eventually, to Cal, without any member of the family recognizing what they carry until the mutation manifests openly in Cal's own body. The novel thus positions Cal's intersex condition within two intersecting American narratives: the story of immigrant assimilation and hybridity, long a central concern of American ethnic fiction, and the more recent history of medical and cultural anxiety about bodies that resist binary sex classification.

This article argues that *Middlesex* uses Cal's body and his retrospective narration of it to mount a sustained critique of the assumption, dominant in twentieth-century American medicine, that every body must be surgically and socially resolved into one of two sexes. Reading the novel alongside the medical history documented by Anne Fausto-Sterling, the Foucauldian genealogy of "true sex" that the novel explicitly invokes through its reference to the memoirs of Herculine Barbin, and Judith Butler's account of gender as performatively constituted, the article traces how *Middlesex* converts an individual case history into a broader argument about the instability of sex and gender categories. It closes, however, by considering an important counter-current in the critical reception of the novel: the concern, raised by intersex studies scholars, that literary treatments of intersex embodiment risk converting a lived, often medically fraught condition into a convenient metaphor for identity and hybridity more generally.

Medical Discourse and the Management of the Intersex Body

The medical episode at the centre of *Middlesex* draws directly on a real and well-documented history of American clinical practice. From the mid-twentieth century onward, American medicine, following protocols developed at institutions such as Johns Hopkins University, generally treated intersex traits in infants and adolescents as conditions requiring prompt surgical and hormonal correction, on the theory that a clearly assigned sex, reinforced early and consistently, was necessary for a child's healthy psychological development (Fausto-Sterling). This approach, associated most closely with the psychologist and sexologist John Money, held that gender identity was largely malleable in early life and that ambiguous genitalia should therefore be surgically resolved as soon as possible, with the child raised thereafter according to the assigned sex regardless of underlying chromosomal or hormonal reality.

In *Middlesex*, this protocol is dramatized directly through the character of Dr. Luce, the New York sexologist to whom the teenage Cal is brought for examination after his condition becomes apparent. Dr. Luce's clinical approach to Cal reproduces, in fictional form, the same assumptions that governed real American intersex management in this period: that Cal's ambiguous anatomy constitutes a problem to be resolved through surgery and hormone treatment, and that his own account of his experience and identity is less authoritative than the clinician's diagnostic judgment (Eugenides). Eugenides stages Cal's growing awareness that Dr. Luce's examinations are oriented toward producing a case history that will justify a particular surgical and social outcome, rather than toward understanding Cal's own developing sense of himself. Cal's eventual flight from the clinic, before any surgery can be performed, therefore functions as more than a plot event; it represents a refusal of the entire framework in which a medical

authority, rather than the intersex person, determines what a body means and what must be done to it.

Anne Fausto-Sterling's critical history of this period, most fully developed in *Sexing the Body*, argues that the American medical insistence on binary sex assignment reflects cultural discomfort with bodily ambiguity rather than any biological necessity, since human sex characteristics in fact vary along several only loosely correlated dimensions—chromosomal, gonadal, hormonal, and anatomical—that do not always align into a single coherent "male" or "female" pattern (Fausto-Sterling). In an earlier and widely discussed essay, Fausto-Sterling had gone further, proposing that biology itself supports recognizing more than two sexes, a provocation intended less as a literal taxonomic proposal than as a challenge to the assumption that binary sex is a simple biological given rather than a social decision imposed upon more complex biological reality (Fausto-Sterling). Read alongside this history, *Middlesex*'s depiction of Dr. Luce is not simply a device for generating narrative tension; it is a fictionalized case study that closely tracks an actual and consequential chapter in the history of American medicine's relationship to intersex bodies.

Foucault, "True Sex," and the Herculine Barbin Intertext

Eugenides makes the novel's engagement with this history explicit by having Cal, in the course of his own reading and self-education, encounter Michel Foucault's edition of the memoirs of Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth-century French intersex person whose autobiography Foucault rediscovered and republished with an extended introduction (Eugenides). In that introduction, Foucault argues that the modern insistence that every individual possesses one, and only one, true sex is a comparatively recent development, and that earlier European legal and religious traditions had, at times, permitted individuals with ambiguous anatomy to choose or retain an ambiguous status without requiring definitive medical resolution (Foucault). For Foucault, Barbin's eventual tragedy—brought about by the nineteenth-century medical and legal insistence that a single true sex be identified and legally enforced—illustrates the violence latent in modernity's demand for absolute sexual clarity.

Cal's encounter with Barbin's memoirs inside the novel functions as a moment of explicit interpretive self-recognition: Cal initially expects to find in Barbin's story a mirror of his own experience, only to conclude that the parallel is incomplete, since Barbin's story ends in social exile and eventual suicide, while Cal, crucially, chooses to leave Dr. Luce's clinic and construct a life as a man on his own terms rather than accepting the identity a medical authority would assign him (Eugenides). This divergence is significant: rather than simply illustrating Foucault's argument, the novel uses it as a foil, allowing Cal's own narrative to depart from the fatalistic trajectory of Foucault's nineteenth-century case. Where Barbin's memoir, as Foucault presents it, records a subject crushed by the demand for a singular true sex, *Middlesex* constructs in Cal a subject who survives that demand by refusing, in practice, to let any external authority have the final word on what his body means.

This intertextual relationship allows Eugenides to situate his own novel explicitly within the genealogy of intersex life-writing that Foucault's edition of Barbin helped establish in Anglophone scholarship, while also marking a historical shift: Cal narrates his life a century after Barbin, in a context—however imperfect—in which medical authority over intersex bodies can at least be recognized, resisted, and narrated in the survivor's own voice rather

than only reconstructed after death from fragmentary archival records.

Judith Butler and the Performative Construction of Gender in Cal's Narration

If Foucault's introduction to Barbin's memoirs supplies *Middlesex* with its historical argument about the invention of true sex, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity supplies a useful vocabulary for understanding how the novel constructs Cal's own gender through the act of narration itself. Butler's central claim, developed across *Gender Trouble*, is that gender is not an expression of some prior, essential identity but is instead produced through the repetition of culturally recognizable acts, gestures, and forms of speech; on this account, the appearance of a stable, essential gender identity is itself an effect generated by that repetition, rather than its origin (Butler). Applied to *Middlesex*, this framework illuminates how Cal's identity as a man is not presented as the belated discovery of a pre-existing essential self that had been mistakenly labelled female in childhood, but as something actively constructed and consolidated through Cal's own choices, habits, and, crucially, through the retrospective narrative he constructs about his own life.

Cal's narration is itself an act of gender-making: by choosing, as an adult narrator, which episodes of his childhood as Calliope to recount, how to characterize his adolescent confusion, and how to frame his eventual decision to live as a man, Cal authors a coherent masculine identity out of a life that did not, in fact, unfold with any such coherence from the outset (Eugenides). The novel's narrative retrospection therefore performs, at the level of literary form, exactly the kind of retroactive construction of identity that Butler's theory describes at the level of everyday bodily practice: gender, in both cases, is assembled after the fact and made to appear as though it had been there all along.

This performative reading also helps explain the novel's distinctive narrative voice, which moves fluidly between Cal's childhood experiences as Calliope and his adult identity as Cal, often narrating scenes from before his transition using a masculine narrating "I" that layers his adult self-understanding onto childhood events he did not, at the time, understand in those terms. Rather than treating this narrative technique as a mere convenience, the novel can be read as dramatizing Butler's claim that gender identity is always, in some sense, retrospectively assembled narrative rather than simply and transparently given.

Genetic Inheritance and the Immigrant Body: Hybridity Doubled

Middlesex roots Cal's intersex condition in a specifically immigrant genetic history, and this choice gives the novel's engagement with gender an additional dimension that connects it to a long tradition of American immigrant fiction concerned with hybridity, assimilation, and inherited difference. The recessive mutation responsible for Cal's condition is transmitted, within the novel's plot, through a marriage between two of Cal's grandparents who are themselves siblings, a relationship formed amid the chaos and displacement of the Greek population's flight from Asia Minor in the 1920s (Eugenides). The mutation therefore enters the family precisely at the point of a socially transgressive, endogamous union produced by the conditions of displacement and diaspora, and it remains hidden, recessive, and unrecognized across a subsequent generation of assimilation into American life before finally manifesting openly in Cal.

This plotting allows Eugenides to draw an implicit parallel between two forms of hybridity that the novel keeps in close proximity throughout: the hybridity of the immigrant family, straddling Greek and American identity across generations, and the biological hybridity of Cal's own intersex body, which straddles categories of male and female. The family's house, itself named "Middlesex" after the street on which it stands in a fictionalized Detroit suburb, becomes the novel's governing spatial metaphor for this doubled in-betweenness, literalizing, in the architecture the family inhabits, the condition of being suspended between two categories that the novel explores at both the level of ethnicity and the level of sex (Eugenides). Read this way, *Middlesex* extends a familiar concern of American immigrant fiction—the negotiation of hybrid, hyphenated identity across generations—onto the terrain of the body itself, suggesting that the instability of inherited categories is not confined to questions of national or ethnic belonging but can equally unsettle categories, such as binary sex, that are conventionally treated as biologically fixed rather than culturally negotiated.

Critical Counter-Currents: Intersex Studies and the Risk of Metaphor

Middlesex's achievement in bringing intersex embodiment into mainstream American fiction has not gone unquestioned by intersex studies scholarship and activism, and any account of the novel's significance should register this critical counter-current. Intersex advocacy, most influentially articulated in the work of activists such as Cheryl Chase and the organization she founded, has consistently emphasized that intersex people are not primarily symbols of hybridity, ambiguity, or in-betweenness but are, first and foremost, a population whose bodies have historically been subject to non-consensual surgical intervention, and whose political demands center on bodily autonomy and informed consent rather than on cultural recognition of ambiguity as such (Chase). From this perspective, literary and cultural treatments of intersex characters risk aestheticizing a medical and human-rights issue, transforming a population's lived experience of surgical harm into a convenient metaphor for other writers' thematic concerns—hybridity, hyphenation, or the instability of identity more broadly—without adequately foregrounding the specific political stakes of intersex embodiment itself.

Transgender studies scholarship offers a related caution. Susan Stryker's influential work on transgender embodiment argues that bodies which do not conform to binary norms are too often treated, in mainstream culture, as symbolically rich but literally monstrous, made to stand for metaphysical questions about identity in ways that obscure the concrete violence such bodies have suffered at the hands of medicine, law, and everyday social life (Stryker). Applied to *Middlesex*, this line of critique suggests that even a sympathetic and carefully researched novel can risk subordinating Cal's specific, embodied intersex experience to the novel's broader thematic interest in hybridity, immigration, and Greek mythological allusion, treating the intersex body as a rich symbol for the human condition in general rather than centering its distinct medical and political history.

Middlesex is, on balance, unusually attentive to this danger: its extended engagement with Dr. Luce's clinical practice, its explicit citation of Foucault's Barbin, and its refusal to grant the medical establishment the final word on Cal's identity all suggest an awareness of the specific political history of intersex medicalization rather than a purely metaphorical use of intersex

embodiment. Nonetheless, the novel's evident interest in using Cal's body as a vehicle for a broader meditation on immigrant hybridity means that the critique remains relevant: readers and critics should hold in view both the novel's genuine engagement with intersex political history and the risk, inherent in any literary treatment of a marginalized embodiment, of converting lived experience into thematic material for purposes that extend well beyond that experience itself.

Conclusion

Middlesex occupies a distinctive place in contemporary American fiction precisely because it refuses to treat Cal's intersex body as either a simple medical case or a purely symbolic device. By staging, in close and historically grounded detail, the clinical protocols that governed American medicine's response to intersex bodies in the twentieth century, and by placing Cal's own narrative in explicit dialogue with Foucault's account of *Herculine Barbin*, the novel constructs an argument about the historical contingency and constructedness of binary sex categories that closely parallels arguments developed independently within queer theory and intersex studies. Judith Butler's account of gender as a performative, retrospectively assembled identity offers a productive vocabulary for understanding how Cal's own first-person narration enacts, at the level of literary form, the same process of identity construction that Butler describes at the level of everyday bodily practice. At the same time, the novel's embedding of Cal's intersex condition within a multigenerational immigrant family history allows it to extend long-standing American literary concerns with hybridity and assimilation onto the terrain of the body itself.

Yet the novel's accomplishment should not obscure the legitimate concerns raised by intersex studies scholars and activists, who caution against treating intersex embodiment primarily as a rich metaphor for identity in general rather than as a specific, historically documented site of medical and political struggle. Read with this caution in mind, *Middlesex*'s lasting significance lies not in offering a final or fully adequate account of intersex experience, but in bringing the historical and ethical stakes of that experience into sustained, serious engagement with a wide literary readership for the first time.

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