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Beyond Enlightenment: Intersex, Performativity, and the Persistence of Gender Myths in *Middlesex*

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Abstract

Despite the scientific and educational advancements of the twenty-first century, myths surrounding intersex bodies continue to shape social cognition and institutional practice. Jeffrey Eugenides' *Middlesex* foregrounds this paradox through the autobiographical narrative of Cal Stephanides, an intersex protagonist negotiating identity within familial, medical, and cultural frameworks. Drawing upon Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, and intersex studies scholarship, this paper argues that myths about intersex identity persist not because of ignorance alone but because binary gender functions as a regulatory discourse embedded in modern epistemology. The novel reveals how medical authority, cultural memory, and heteronormative ideology reproduce myths under the guise of scientific rationality. Even within a supposedly enlightened era, intersex bodies are disciplined, classified, and normalized through institutional mechanisms. By situating *Middlesex* within contemporary theoretical frameworks, this study demonstrates that the endurance of myth is structural rather than accidental. Eugenides ultimately challenges the binary logic that governs modern subjectivity, suggesting that genuine progress requires epistemic transformation rather than mere accumulation of knowledge.

Keywords: Intersex identity, Gender performativity, Biopower, Binary discourse, Myth and modernity, Jeffrey Eugenides

Introduction

The twenty-first century frequently positions itself as an age of enlightenment characterized by genetic research, gender theory, and expanded human rights discourse. Yet despite these developments, myths about intersex bodies persist within social, cultural, and institutional frameworks. Intersex individuals continue to be perceived as anomalies, medical errors, or deviations from a presumed natural order. This persistence raises a fundamental question: why do myths survive even in an era defined by scientific advancement? *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides offers a compelling exploration of this paradox. Through the life story of Cal Stephanides, born Calliope, the novel examines how intersex identity is shaped by family history, migration, medicine, religion, and social expectation. While set largely in twentieth-century America, the novel

speaks directly to contemporary debates about gender identity and bodily autonomy. This paper argues that *Middlesex* exposes the structural persistence of gender myths through modern institutions. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, the study demonstrates how binary ideology is reproduced through discourse rather than dismantled by knowledge. Eugenides' narrative reveals that myth operates not as primitive superstition but as a regulatory framework embedded within modern epistemology. Thus, even in an age of enlightenment, intersex bodies remain sites of classification, normalization, and control.

Gender Performativity and the Myth of Natural Binary

Judith Butler's theory of performativity, particularly articulated in *Gender Trouble*, challenges the assumption that gender is a natural expression of biological sex. Instead, gender is constituted through repeated acts, gestures, and discourses that produce the illusion of stability. According to Butler, the binary system of male/female operates as a regulatory norm rather than a biological inevitability. In *Middlesex*, Calliope initially performs femininity through socially prescribed behaviors, dress, speech, posture, without recognizing the constructed nature of these acts. Her eventual transition to Cal reflects not a discovery of an essential truth but a renegotiation of performative identity. The novel thus destabilizes the myth that gender identity is fixed or inherently determined by anatomy. The cultural insistence that bodies must align coherently with gender categories reflects what Butler describes as the "heterosexual matrix" a framework that naturalizes binary oppositions. Intersex identity disrupts this matrix by exposing its artificial coherence. Cal's existence challenges the myth of natural binary stability, revealing it instead as a discursive production maintained through repetition and social enforcement. Even in the twenty-first century, his myth persists in bureaucratic systems that demand gender classification. Thus, despite theoretical advancements, binary ideology

continues to function as common sense. Eugenides' novel dramatizes Butler's claim that gender norms are sustained not through truth but through repetition and fear of incoherence.

Foucault, Biopower, and Medical Regulation

Michel Foucault's concept of biopower provides another critical framework for understanding the novel. Biopower refers to the ways modern states regulate bodies and populations through medical, scientific, and institutional practices. Unlike overt repression, biopower operates subtly through classification, surveillance, and normalization. In *Middlesex*, Dr. Luce embodies biopolitical authority. His clinical interest in Calliope transforms her body into an object of research. Medical discourse claims neutrality, yet it enforces binary coherence by recommending surgical intervention to "correct" ambiguity. The body becomes something to be disciplined into intelligibility. The myth here is that science is purely objective. Foucault reminds us that knowledge and power are intertwined; medical categories produce the subjects they describe. By labeling Calliope as a "disorder," the institution frames her existence as pathological. The assumption that surgery will restore normality reflects the regulatory function of biopower. This phenomenon continues in contemporary society. Intersex surgeries on infants often performed without consent demonstrate how modern institutions prioritize normative appearance over bodily autonomy. Eugenides critiques this medicalized myth of correction, exposing how scientific rationality can perpetuate ideological control.

Intersex Studies and the Politics of Visibility

Intersex scholars such as Anne Fausto-Sterling argue that biological sex exists along a spectrum rather than within two rigid categories. Scientific research recognizes chromosomal, hormonal, and anatomical variations that complicate binary classification. However, social institutions resist this complexity. *Middlesex* dramatizes this tension between biological diversity and social rigidity. Cal's condition—5-alpha-reductase deficiency—is scientifically

explainable. Yet the cultural reaction to his body reflects anxiety rather than acceptance. Knowledge does not dissolve discomfort. The persistence of myth, therefore, is cognitive and cultural rather than informational. Even when science recognizes variation, society continues to privilege simplicity over ambiguity. Eugenides demonstrates that intersex identity becomes threatening because it destabilizes symbolic order. The novel also addresses visibility. Cal's narrative voice asserts subjectivity, reclaiming agency from institutions that sought to define him. Storytelling becomes resistance. By narrating his own life, Cal disrupts the myth that intersex individuals must remain silent or hidden.

Myth, Migration, and Inherited Narratives

Beyond gender, the novel situates identity within generational migration. The Stephanides family history marked by displacement from Smyrna illustrates how myth and memory shape self-understanding. The incestuous union of the grandparents becomes symbolically linked to genetic variation, creating a narrative of inherited destiny. This narrative reflects what Roland Barthes describes as myth functioning as naturalized ideology. The association between familial "sin" and bodily difference mirrors ancient mythic structures, even within modern settings. Eugenides suggests that myth persists because it provides narrative coherence. However, the novel ultimately resists deterministic interpretation. Cal refuses to interpret his body as curse or punishment. In doing so, he challenges the mythic logic that seeks moral explanation for biological variation.

The Twenty-First Century Paradox

Although *Middlesex* spans much of the twentieth century, its implications resonate strongly today. The twenty-first century has witnessed greater advocacy for intersex rights, yet myths endure in media representation, social stigma, and institutional policy. The paradox lies in the coexistence of knowledge and myth. Scientific literacy does not automatically dismantle deeply embedded cognitive frameworks. Binary ideology remains psychologically reassuring because it simplifies com-

plexity. Intersex identity exposes the fragility of that simplification. Through Butler's performativity and Foucault's biopower, we understand that myths survive because they are structurally embedded in discourse and institutions. They are reproduced through language, law, and medical practice. Eugenides' novel becomes a literary intervention that reveals these mechanisms.

Conclusion

Middlesex demonstrates that the persistence of myths about intersex identity is not a relic of premodern ignorance but a feature of modern epistemology. Through Cal Stephanides' narrative, Jeffrey Eugenides exposes how binary ideology is sustained through performative repetition and institutional regulation. Drawing on Butler's theory of gender performativity and Foucault's concept of biopower, this paper has argued that myths endure because they are embedded in structures of knowledge and power. Even in the twenty-first century, education and scientific advancement have not eradicated myths surrounding intersex bodies. Instead, myths adapt, appearing in medical discourse, bureaucratic systems, and cultural narratives. The novel challenges readers to reconsider the assumptions underlying gender classification and to recognize intersex identity as part of human diversity rather than deviation. True enlightenment, *Middlesex* suggests, requires not only knowledge but epistemic humility the willingness to question binary logic itself. Until such transformation occurs, myths will continue to shape cognition, even within societies that claim progress.

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