



Essay Review

Sex Isn't Simple ... or, Down With Dichotomies!

by

Nanelle Rose Barash

Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides.
529 pp, Farrar, Straus & Giroux (2002)

Middlesex. The word itself seems a perfect oxymoron: there is nothing “middle” about sex or gender. Babies’ chromosomes – we like to assume - are either XY or XX; end of story. Adults, by the same token, would be short or tall, aggressive or nurturing, hairy or smooth. They have long hair or short, pants or skirts, penises or vaginas. And that’s where most people are wrong, as Jeffery Eugenides’ latest epic so compellingly demonstrates.

With increasing awareness of homosexuality, many people are growing accustomed to sexual behavior that deviates from normal (i.e., hetero) mating patterns. Yes, men can increasingly hold hands in public spaces without being spat upon, but homosexuality only scratches the surface of the vast and intriguing landscape of human sexual behavior. Transsexuals celebrate every day that gender and sex do not necessarily go hand in hand, that anatomy does not rigidly constrain one’s sexual expression. New

investigations into human sexuality take this one step further: anatomy itself can be as elusive as gender and just as deceptive. Individuals, such as the fictional Callie Stephanides, Eugenides’ main character, can be born looking like a girl and later became a boy, both physically and mentally. *Middlesex* masterfully chronicles the changes from a her into a him in a manner that is sufficiently like a case study to be scientifically interesting, but with enough fictional skill to be popular with the general audiences as well.

Middlesex is a true novelistic success, and not only in its conception and excitement, but even in critical acclaim: it won a Pulitzer Prize for the best novel of 2002. Its multigenerational focus is reminiscent of revered and beloved epics such as Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and does a similarly admirable job of delving into the depths of a foreign culture, in this case Greek.

The writing is at once lyrically poetic and grounded in the everyday, full of marvelous images and details taken directly from real life. It is not only a work of literary genius, but also a revolutionary social text. Whether knowingly or not, Eugenides has done an admirable job of gently introducing the idea of hermaphroditism into the American psyche. As a scientific treatise, *Middlesex* seems to be a remarkably accurate case study and is a harbinger of mounting scientific interest in the diverse field of human sexuality.

This gene-centered epic of love and family ties begins with an invocation to God, to Darwin, or to biological scientists everywhere, while also evoking a suitable Greek legacy of Homeric epics: "Sing now, O muse, of the recessive mutation on my fifth chromosome!" Repeated generations of incest – between brother and sister, between two cousins – eventuate in the phenotypic expression of a mutation: in young Callie Stephanides' case, an deficiency of 5-alpha-reductase. *Middlesex* chronicles the family life leading up to Callie's birth, and then delves into the complicated adolescent psyche of a young adult stranded between male and female. *Middlesex* takes a long, hard, but altogether engaging look at gender differences, raising the issue that maddens scientists and the public alike: how much of sexual identity is nature, gene-based, anatomy-based, and how much is nurture, deriving from one's rearing and upbringing?

Tackling this difficult – and, in a sense, impossible – question, is Eugenides' character, the sexologist Dr. Luce, who exemplifies the 1970s emphasis on nurture over nature. He suggests that "Children learn to speak Male or Female the way they learn to speak English or French" and that "chromosomal status" can be "completely overridden by rearing." In the end, however, Callie rejects the all-nurture hypothesis by boldly proclaiming himself to be a boy, changing his name to Cal, and running away across the country, rejoicing in his newfound freedom to enter boys' bathrooms. This tri-

umph of nature over nurture seems irrefutable, until Cal muses on his situation, and clarifies one of the biggest misconceptions in behavior studies today.

Scientists of all kinds, but especially of behavior, long to simplify phenomena into discrete categories; we wish always for Mendel's pea plants, with their clearly defined shapes, colors, and sizes. Nature, however, consistently rejects categorization, stubbornly remaining just at the edge of simple formulas. Behavior is neither entirely determined by genetics nor by rearing – rather, it is the intricate combination of the two that unite into a single individual. Just as Cal's sexual anatomy is indecisive, somewhere between a man and a woman, his gender identity is equally fluid. Neither male nor female in anatomy and behavior, Cal rejects being the poster-child of any particular theory. Scientists should pay him heed when he confidently proclaims that "free will is making a comeback. Biology gives you a brain. Life turns it into a mind."

Novels have long been discriminated against in scientific circles. They don't rely on facts, they skew the reader's judgement by introducing emotion, they confound the deductive power of the scientific method. And yet, they too have a place in scientific inquiry. *Middlesex* bridges many gaps: between male and female, to be sure, but also the gap between research labs and the general public, even as it condenses and synthesizes scientific investigations into a coherent, manageable world-view. Jeffery Eugenides' voyage within the head of a pseudohermaphrodite can be read as a case study, although fictionalized and thus, scientifically suspect. It must also be acclaimed a remarkable tour-de-force, especially since Eugenides himself is married with children and appears to be a "normal," heterosexual specimen. *Middlesex* should be required reading for anyone interested in human sexuality and behavior, from either a literary or scientific viewpoint. Its beauty lies as much in its scientific interest as in its language.

Several decades ago, C. P. Snow warned about the “two cultures,” one scientific and one humanistic, whose practitioners rarely encountered each other, whether personally or intellectually. Middlesex should help lure the inhabitants of each onto some very fertile and pleas-

ant middle ground.

Nanelle Barash is a student at The Overlake School in Redmond, Washington. In autumn, 2003, she will begin attending Swarthmore College. Email: nanellie@hotmail.com.