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Take a Third Option: Multigender in *Middlesex*

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Jeffery Eugenides' *Middlesex* presents a protagonist, Calliope, coming to terms with hir gender identity. For some critics, the final stage of this development is Calliope's return to hir family and decision to live as a man. By this understanding, they mistakenly conflate the end of that narrative with the narrative of the framing device, set in the present. They ignore the fact that Cal's time as a firmly-defined man is even worse than hir time as a woman, a sad reality that has not changed in the present. Adult, male-identifying Cal still lives in hiding, cut off from society and unable to bring any romantic relationship to fruition. Conversely, when Cal accepts the hybrid nature of hir gender and reveals it to others, xe is able to form hir most meaningful and honest relationships: with Julie, with Zora, and with the Obscure Object. The fact that these relationships exist across the three stages of Cal's gender development—female-identifying, male-identifying, and hybrid—will address the argument of some critics that Cal's happiness at the novel's close is due to a presumed acceptance of a masculine identity.

It is tempting to cheer Cal on when he declares, in his self-assured letter written to his parents when running away, "I am not a girl. I'm a boy. That's what I found out today" (439). After so much doubt, living through years of unhappy uncertainty as an imperfect girl, Cal is finally able to take a firm stance in his masculine identity. And yet, these lines are preceded by a somewhat disheartening caveat: "I know you're only trying to do what's best for me, but I don't think anyone knows for sure what's best" (438). Furthermore, there is something vaguely threatening about which possessions Cal chooses to take and which he leaves behind: a brassiere is "abandoned" in favor of "darker garments" including "alligator shirts," and a wad of money which will be paid back "with interest" (438-9). The signature, "Callie," rendered epitaphic by the assertion that "it was the last time I was ever their daughter," further reveals the letter's deeply ambivalent nature (439).

While some might argue that this letter really is a definite epitaph for the female identity, and that as Cal heads West he leaves Calliope behind and moves into a state of self-acceptance and comfort in his masculinity, this is not really an interpretation supported by the text. The last view of the feminine identity is shrouded in doubt and second-thoughts: "There she was, for the last time, in the silvered glass: Calliope. She still wasn't gone yet. She was like a captive spirit, peeking out[...]. What if the girl in the mirror really *was* me?"

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(442). Cal's first view of his newly-shorn masculine face is hardly encouraging, either: "I opened my eyes. And in the mirror I didn't see myself" (445).

Consider, further, the language the barber uses to describe the haircut, rife with castration imagery: "This is like taking down a tree[...]. First you gotta go in and lop off the branches. Then you chop down the trunk" (442). The haircut becomes, in its assault on Calliope, a dark mirror of the surgery which would have destroyed Cal. Hardly anyone suggests that it would have been better for Cal had Dr. Luce performed the "corrective" surgery—why, then, should we interpret this as a positive transformation?

Perhaps it is because we want so badly to believe Cal will be happy, that Cal truly has become a "new creation" who reflects an interior self now whole and in order (445). Yet Callie herself laid a groundwork for the skepticism with which we should view this new identity, only a little earlier: "It wasn't difficult to pour my identity into different vessels. In a sense, I was able to take whatever form was demanded of me" (434). Callie is foreshadowing that the vessel into which she will soon pour her identity is something demanded of her—but by whom? She answers this in the same breath: "The prospect of having everything solved was wildly attractive to me" (434). In essence, this is a demand Callie places on herself. Though the idea of living as a man is frightening, it is something definite, and as such represents the solution she seeks to the problematic, uncertain nature of her as-yet-unrealized hybrid gender. Patricia E. Chu argues that by "refusing surgery, Cal rejects the old depth-ridden fate" (281), but one might argue that blindly choosing the exact opposite of what one perceives as one's genetic fatalism is still, itself, fate—just in the opposite direction.

The unhappiness Cal feels at the creation of his masculine identity betrays the unhappy nature of the days and years to follow. The reason for this, really, is that Cal is more vulnerable as a male. During Cal's trip West, he is picked up by Scheer, a lecherous intellectual-type who gets Cal drunk before attempting to have sex with him in a cheap motel. Thankfully, Cal is able to stop him, but it is an unquestionably repulsive encounter. Bob Presto later reveals that Scheer is a "chicken hawk," a sexual predator who preys on the weak, which Cal, having opened himself to the rigid standards of masculinity, now is (461).

The indeterminacy which projected strength in Callie becomes weakness and vulnerability in Cal, leaving him open to more predators than just Scheer. The uncertainty with which Cal inhabits his masculine form entices the exploitative Bob Presto, and, eager for new talent at his sex shows, he grills Cal for the details of his sexuality and gender: "Are you gay?" (461). "You a tranny?...Don't get offended, I know about pre-op and post-op and all that stuff" (463). Presto wishes to make a freak of Cal, but Zora is there to save him.

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Zora takes Cal into hir home, but more importantly xe accepts the hybrid-gendered Calliope lurking within him. This acceptance is three-fold; first, Zora accepts Cal as a being deserving of life, sheltering him as xe's sheltered other "strays" with non-standard genitalia (488). Furthermore, as Cal reveals when he reminisces—"She was the first one I met. The first person like me"—Zora alerts Cal to the non-uniqueness of his hermaphroditism (488). "I wasn't the only one! Listening to Zora, that was mainly what hit home with me...I just wanted to stay with Zora, to learn from her, and to be less alone in the world" (489).

Zora is, for Cal, an in-the-flesh example of a *person* living as a hybrid-gender, as opposed to the hypothetical "MONSTER" of the Webster's dictionary (430). For Calliope, that label calls up images of a "lumbering, shaggy creature paused at the edge of the woods," a clear illustration of her fear that she is subhuman, some horrifying half-beast that must live on the edge of humanity and wilderness (431). Zora, as a mermaid, presents a contrasting mythological hybrid which is far more appealing: "no lewdness...Her face was serene, her eyes a light Caribbean blue" (431). Further, unlike the Loch Ness monster in its "icy lake," or the Minotaur, lost and lonely in its labyrinth, a mermaid is neither a prisoner nor alone, but free to swim where she will in the company of her kind (432). Some might question whether this is applicable to the masculine-bodied Cal, but, as he says, "though we looked nothing alike, Zora was always emphatic about our solidarity. We were up against the same prejudices and misgivings" (492).

Having already awakened Cal to Calliope's humanity and potential for freedom and human connection, Zora then gives Calliope a nation. First, their history: "There have been hermaphrodites around forever, Cal. Forever. Plato said that the original human being was a hermaphrodite" (489). Xe also reveals to Cal a culture, in the form of the "berdaches," who in the Navajo tradition "are the shamans of the tribe. They're the healers, the great weavers, the artists" (489). Cal's identification of Zora as a "John the Baptist crying in the wilderness" illustrates this induction of hybrid-gender Calliope into the hermaphroditic tradition (488).

Calliope needs this companionship and open acceptance from another person of hir hybrid-gender. To illustrate, compare the previous passages celebrating membership and acceptance with the following: "We hermaphrodites are people like everybody else. And I happen not to be a political person. I don't like groups...I live my own life and nurse my own wounds" (106). Make no mistake, despite the lip-service self-inclusion into the hermaphroditic tradition of which Calliope was briefly a member, this is masculine-identifying Cal, lonely and defeated: "It's not the best way to live. But it's the way I am" (106). Stephanie Hsu accuses Eugenides of portraying this self-exiling "stealth" as

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“an alternative strategy for intersex survival,” though the obvious despair from which Cal is suffering does not really suggest that this strategy is an effective one (93).

Those who believe that Cal’s identification as a definite male is a positive one would likely interpret teenage Cal’s terrifying journey west as mere gender-identity growing pains, or Cal awkwardly learning how to behave like a man. Any awkwardness, they would argue, hardly discredits the legitimacy of Cal’s gender identity on its own, for after all, Cal himself reminds us that “my swagger wasn’t that different from what lots of adolescent boys put on, trying to be manly. For that reason it was convincing. Its very falseness made it credible” (449). It is the same type of apologizing, justifying language he employs in describing himself thirty years later: “I’m not androgynous in the least...I operate in society as a man...I use the men’s room. Never the urinals, always the stalls. In the men’s locker room at the gym I even shower, albeit discreetly. I possess all the secondary sex characteristics of a normal man except one” (41). Even his clothes aren’t really natural: “The cigars, the double-breasted suits—they’re a little too much. I’m well aware of that. But I need them. They make me feel better. After what I’ve been through, some overcompensation is to be expected” (41). If Cal is making all the same excuses, covering up all the same awkwardness, then it’s a fair assessment that Cal isn’t really any more comfortable operating in society as a man at forty-two than he was at fourteen.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in Cal’s terribly depressing, failed interactions with women. His first sighting of Julie produces in Cal “a state of voluptuous agitation, of agitated voluptuousness” (41). Cal’s discomfort might be considered prescience of the fact that the relationship he intends to begin with Julie will fail, if not for the fact that this failure will be the direct result of Cal’s own inability to connect with her. This is a result of his identifying as a thoroughly common male without the courage to reveal his unique genitalia. Hsu argues that “Julie’s companionship is integral to Cal’s performance of heterosexuality,” but in truth only when the commitment to traditional heterosexuality is dropped can Julie actually be a companion (88).

Due to the bisected narrative, which describes the events of Cal’s life in sequences which run parallel to each other, it is easy to forget that all this awkwardness transpires decades after Cal’s decision to identify as male. Nothing has become easier, really—Cal is still emotionally on the run, moving from country to country now instead of state to state. The closing lines of the novel are vague and hopeful: “I stood in the door for an hour, maybe two. I lost track after a while, happy to be home, weeping for my father, and thinking about what was next” (529). This closing line is only optimistic when transposed chronologically to apply to the new intimacy of his relationship with Julie; after all, the “next” for Cal was decades of a failed attempt at a male identity. Even at

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forty-two, Cal tells us “I still don’t feel entirely at home among men” (479).

Like his other acts of attempted masculinity—using the men’s bathroom but never the urinals, for instance—Cal’s relationships with women are a perfect artifice except for one detail; in this case, sex: “The final protection, my roomy, my discreet boxer shorts, these I do not remove. Ever. Instead I leave, making excuses. I leave and never call them again. Just like a guy” (107). And yet again, *not* a guy, only *just like* one, and not even that—for surely, there is a step missing between the removal of the outer layers of clothing and the abandonment of all contact. Again Cal must retreat to hyper-masculine pantomime to overcompensate, pushing away women with whom he wants desperately to be intimate both physically and emotionally. Merton Lee also recognizes the inherent tension in Cal’s behavior, noting that “Cal, who insistently describes his masculinity as containing not the least amount of androgyny, obviously identifies with maleness, but that masculinity is just as obviously barred” (42).

It is important that we note the sad, hopeless fatalism to Cal’s description of his future with Julie: “My date for Friday night. It’s just a first date. It won’t come to anything. No reason to mention my peculiarities, my wandering in the maze these many years, shut away from sight. And from love, too” (107). This is the future to which masculine-identifying Cal is bound, almost deterministically. After a lovely vacation with Julie, he fabricates a future in which everything must fail, allowing him to avoid confronting his hybrid-identity: “I began to look ahead. I thought of the next step and what would be required of me. The preparations, the explanations, the very real possibility of shock, horror, withdrawal” (272). It is telling that Julie being disgusted by hybrid-gender Calliope can only be discussed as a possibility, outcome uncertain. What truly scares Cal is the certainty that for further intimacy to exist he must reveal his hybrid-gender identity to himself. This is what he means by “preparation” (272).

Julie calls Cal a “cigar faddist” when they run into each other again, an expression of her awareness and acceptance of the put-on nature of his masculinity—he does not smoke a cigar because he wants one, he smokes one because that is what men do (498). By telling Cal that she sees through the insincerity of the phallic cigar, Julie is also saying that she sees through the Cal-mask to the hybrid-gender Calliope inside. Calliope is then able to reveal himself to Julie, an action directly in opposition with Cal’s typical behavior, as evidenced by his body language: “After a while I swiveled around so I was facing her. She turned her face toward me” (498). If Calliope is willing to turn himself toward Julie, Julie will turn to him. The mutual drawing-closer is repeated in their next action: “I leaned toward her. Julie leaned toward me” (498).

Buoyed up by this, we see the last scene of the story, chronologically,

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which confirms Calliope's happiness as a result of the acceptance of hir hybrid gender-identity: "What I told you about myself has nothing whatsoever to do with being gay or closeted. I've always liked girls. I liked girls when I was a girl" (513). Calliope, having already admitted the imperfection of hir masculinity, distances hirself from a purely feminine gender-identity as well. It is only then that xe is able to take Julie to the bedroom, somewhere Calliope hasn't taken anyone "in quite a long time" (513). There, xe tells us, they "got under the covers and held each other, petrified, happy" (514). This happy image of mutual acceptance is the confirmation of Calliope's future, whole and happy.

The happiness Calliope feels with Julie is of a kind xe hasn't had since she lost the Obscure Object (O.O.), one of only two people before Julie—Zora, the other—for whom xe was able to be neither the confused girl nor the self-deluding man, but the third, the hybrid gender. Contrasted with the openness of hir intimacy with Julie, however, Calliope's affair with the O.O. only happens as a kind of shared dream. The O.O. affects enervation, lifting her hips slightly in their first intimate session being "her only contribution" (384). It is never entirely clear if the O.O. is even conscious for these sessions, which Calliope remembers as "wordless, blinkered, a nighttime thing, a dream thing" (385). Only her hand is ever "completely awake" (386).

There are some who argue that Calliope's encounters with the O.O. are not a model for hir future happiness because of the shame with which xe seems to describe them, a "fugue state," "largely anonymous" (386). They would argue that these early encounters are proof that Calliope cannot be happy as an indeterminate gender-identity because the O.O. is not a willing participant. The O.O.'s "eyes remained closed throughout, her head was often turned slightly away. She moved under me as a sleeping girl might while being ravished by an incubus. She was like somebody having a dirty dream, confusing her pillow for a lover" (387).

However, it makes more sense to understand Calliope and O.O.'s relationship as the prototype for Calliope's future relationship with Julie, "the way it goes in adolescence" (386). The Obscure Object's affected insensibility is not disgust for Calliope's indeterminate gender. Rather, it is the refuge of the insensible virgin, the same which Calliope offers Jerome: "I was pretty drunk last night" (379). Cal highlights the emotional immaturity of both of them by referring to the act as "sharing your toys," further exonerating the O.O. (386).

Thus we can determine that there is definite precedent established in the work for Calliope's happiness with Julie with the truth of hir indeterminate gender revealed. From Zora, Calliope received acceptance of hir gender identity, and from the O.O. she received sexual intimacy. These relationships, the most intimate and affirming in Calliope's life, are both present and possible with Julie. Thus, it is reasonable to reject the interpretation by Shostak that *Middlesex*

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“demonstrates the virtual impossibility of [hybrid-gender identification] except as a Utopian fantasy” (386-7). On the contrary, Eugenides goes to great lengths to present all the pieces which are necessary for this identification to be viable, and to show that they are present in Julie.

Those who understand Cal’s masculine-identity as the apex of his happiness will likely interpret the novel as an anthem for perseverance through the social difficulty of living as the gender with which one identifies. They are not far off the mark, but Cal’s dissatisfaction with his purely masculine gender is not entirely a social issue. The overall message of this novel seems to be one of the reward in finding one’s true identity and the wholeness that can come from allowing someone else to see it, even if, possibly only if, that person is the *only* one who does.

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