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The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom

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1

The Queer Times of *Leave It to Beaver*



Beaver's Present, Ward's Past, and June's Future

Television entered mainstream American culture in the 1950s, with the queer fantasies of the family sitcom genre, family-friendly programming, and the preternaturally innocent child emerging along with it. Within the field of television studies, American family sitcoms of the 1950s and early 1960s, in their shared depictions of smiling clans populating suburban Edens, have long been viewed as sugar-coated fare divorced from the era's gendered, racial, and socioeconomic discontents. Such readings, accurate in the main, nonetheless whitewash the genre's and the era's complexity, inculcating a de facto presumption of heteronormativity that brooks little room for dissent. Time's ostensible linearity obscures its deeper meanings, with the chimerical illusion of forward progress masking history's inevitable contradictions. *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–63) exemplifies the gentle respectability of the 1950s nuclear family as portrayed on America's televisions, yet when one allows for the queerness of time in framing its characters, Beaver, Ward, and June emerge both as representatives of a 1950s suburban bubble and as characters impossible to contain within it. With the program ranging across the past of Ward's backstory, the present of Beaver's gendered misadventures, and into the future of June's role as a cultural icon, fleeting yet intriguing visions of familial queerness coalesce,

collectively dismantling assumptions about the stifling sexual politics of television's early years.

Certainly, the 1950s occupy a privileged position in the American imaginary: prosperity reigned in the years following World War II as veterans returned home and built a suburban paradise, with President Dwight D. Eisenhower presiding over a nation expanding its international influence. Such are the lessons that the gospel of 1950s nostalgia preaches, and in many ways this nostalgia defines the decade, as Jean Baudrillard affirms: "The fifties were the real high spot for the US ('when things were going on'), and you can still feel the nostalgia for those years, for the ecstasy of power, when power held power."¹ Fredric Jameson, while acknowledging the decade's allure, complicates this vision by stressing how its televisual portrayals in effect created its legacy: "This is clearly, however, to shift from the realities of the 1950s to the representation of that rather different thing, the 'fifties,' a shift which obligates us in addition to underscore the cultural sources of all the attributes with which we have endowed the period, many of which seem very precisely to derive from its own television programs; in other words, its own representation of itself."² These images created enduring stereotypes of American families: white, comfortably (upper) middle class, and happily ensconced in the suburbs. Stephanie Coontz, concurring with Jameson's view, believes that television programs define the decade for many: "Our most powerful visions of traditional families derive from images that are still delivered to our homes in countless reruns of 1950s television sit-coms."³ As she further demonstrates, however, this vision of the 1950s white, suburban family itself represents a historical anomaly, one that arose in response to a host of demographic factors, including younger ages for marriage and motherhood and increased fertility (and thus the advent of the baby boom generation).⁴ Nostalgia defines many viewers' relationship to 1950s television, no matter the rose-colored glasses necessary to overlook the period's numerous problems, particularly the secondary status of women and racial minorities and the destructive silence enveloping GLBT people.

But as much as we may think we know the 1950s, any attempt to define a period inevitably falls to the impossibility of capturing a zeitgeist beyond its roughest contours. As several queer theorists have recently explored, time is often (mis)used to crudely construct a blanket sense of historical normativity that hides the varieties of existence within, and resistance to, a given era. Elizabeth Freeman questions the tyranny of "chrononormativity," which she eloquently defines as "the interlocking temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent and for the mundane workings of domestic life," and which she expands to include "the use of time to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity."⁵ Chrononormativity presumes that humans will accede into dominant ideological regimes, particularly those of gender, sexuality, and social class, yet such a process is almost inevitably rendered

queer through the contortions of identity essential for propagating normality. Recognizing history's weight and time's gossamer reach, Carolyn Dinshaw calls for "the possibility of a fuller, denser, more crowded *now* that all sorts of theorists tell us is extant but that often eludes our temporal grasp."⁶ This concept of a *now* suffused with moments beyond its immediate passing subverts the facile view of time's linearity and complicates efforts to determine the meaning of narratives whose span includes the historical past from which they emerge, the contemporary present of their production, and the ensuing decades of their reception. Studies of television programs must urgently attend to the queer and queering ramifications of time, particularly because no program can be cordoned off solely to its years of production but by necessity must engage with the past (both in its creation and in its backstories) and with the future (in its always shifting reception). Dismantling simplistic assumptions of chrononormativity, television's inherent flow challenges the linearity of time through the multitudinous temporal construction perpetually in play in watching a given program.

Leave It to Beaver, in its crosscuttings of temporality, testifies both to the allure of chrononormativity and to its ultimate limitations. The program adheres to the core structures of the family sitcom: father Ward (Hugh Beaumont) and mother June (Barbara Billingsley) live comfortably and contentedly with their sons, Wally (Tony Dow) and Theodore "the Beaver" (Jerry Mathers), in a suburban hamlet where together they confront the gentle challenges of growing up. In each episode, one character errs and consequently learns an important lesson, with Beaver often, but by no means always, filling this role. During the series' six seasons, Wally and Beaver mature, with the program concluding as they respectively prepare to enter college and high school. But as Kathryn Bond Stockton so ably demonstrates, children do not "grow up"—with the implicit heteronormative assumption of "growing up straight"—as much as they "grow sideways": "Growing sideways' suggests that the width of a person's experience or ideas, their motives or their motions, may pertain at any age, bringing 'adults' and 'children' into lateral contact of surprising sorts. This kind of growth is made especially palpable . . . by (the fiction of) the ghostly gay child—the publicly impossible child whose identity *is* a deferral (sometimes powerfully and happily so) and an act of growing sideways, by virtue of its *future retroaction* as a child."⁷ Stockton focuses on the "ghostly gay child" in her analysis, yet the apparently stultifying innocence of 1950s domestic sitcoms obscures the necessity to consider the "ghostly straight child"—one who navigates an intriguingly queer journey to heterosexuality. In this regard, families that appear bastions of sexual normativity often merely camouflage their underlying queerness.

Further along these lines, *Leave It to Beaver* portrays Beaver on the edge of queerness, such that Ward frequently voices concern over his son's sexual

development. Yet as much as Beaver represents the marginalized child growing sideways into heterosexuality, so, too, do Ward's clumsy efforts at child raising in the program's narrative present and the specters of parental abuse in his past frame his maturation as an ultimately queer process. While the series stresses Beaver's (and to a lesser extent, Wally's) maturation as its primary story line, its depictions of Ward hint at the possibility of his sideways growth from a battered childhood into a confused adulthood. In a similar vein, June Cleaver has been both lionized and vilified for the image of 1950s domesticity she embodies, yet Barbara Billingsley subverted June's chrononormative and nostalgic appeal in her later career by cagily and campily restaging the impossibility of this maternal ideal. As evident from these chinks in its late 1950s and early 1960s foundation of domestic respectability, *Leave It to Beaver* presents the Cleavers as an exemplary and wholesome family while tamping down the queer potential simmering underneath its suburban facade.

Chrononormativity and the 1950s Family Sitcom

Chrononormative readings of 1950s family sitcoms stress their patriarchal foundations, in which a wise, patient father and a nurturing, stay-at-home mother raise two or more cute children, with *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952–66), *Make Room for Daddy* (1953–65), and *Father Knows Best* (1954–60) modeling this paradigm. These programs depict family life as a harmonious ideal, with only the mildest disruptions to the family unit sparking an episode's plot. The narrative prominence of Ozzie Nelson, Danny Thomas's "Daddy" Danny Williams, and Robert Young's "Father" Jim Anderson registers in their show's titles, and, as Nina Leibman argues, various other television techniques maintain the spotlight on the father: "Dad's implicit power is rendered in the flow and content of familial conversation, in his omnipresence for both disciplinary and praise-giving occasions, in his frequent position at the center of the narrative, and in his visual and aural dominance."⁸ Congruent with this perspective, Horace Newcomb observes that "domestic situation comedies . . . offered a soothing view of the traditional family, content with basic values of the home—warm, comforting, and designed along lines of gender authority";⁹ David Halberstam posits that "the family sitcoms reflected—and reinforced—much of the social conformity of the period. There was no divorce. There was no serious sickness, particularly mental illness. Families *liked* each other, and they tolerated each other's idiosyncrasies."¹⁰

Leibman's, Newcomb's, and Halberstam's observations about the traditional structures of 1950s family sitcoms are realized throughout *Leave It to Beaver*: Ward benevolently rules the home from his book-lined study; June lovingly tends to her maternal duties in the kitchen; and although Beaver may angrily shout "rat, rat, rat!" at Wally during moments of pique (e.g., "Beaver's

Birthday,” “Beaver’s Electric Trains”), the vast majority of episodes feature the boys enjoying each other’s company, despite their age difference.¹¹ One could quibble with Halberstam’s statement that 1950s sitcoms eschew such topics as divorce and mental illness, for *Leave It to Beaver* tackles these themes in such episodes as “Beaver’s House Guest” (in which Beaver’s friend Chopper must deal with the emotional repercussions of his parents’ divorce) and “Beaver and Andy” (in which Beaver realizes that the Cleavers’ handyman suffers from alcoholism). Because the program condemns the former and sympathetically portrays those who struggle with the latter, the spirit of Halberstam’s point holds, especially since both disruptions occur outside the family unit itself. Virtually every episode of *Leave It to Beaver* confirms Leibman’s, Newcomb’s, and Halberstam’s readings of 1950s sitcoms, so it would be folly to deny the force—indeed, the accuracy—of chrononormative interpretations.

Further advancing this chrononormative perspective, the nostalgic vision of the 1950s as a time of suburban comfort and financial prosperity carries through in the period’s sitcoms, imbuing them with an optimistic vision of America as a nation striving for ever greater heights. In his study of media depictions of America’s suburbs, David Coon observes, “Family sitcoms from the 1950s and 1960s, such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, helped to develop an onscreen image of suburbia as a utopian space filled with desirable homes, happy families, and trouble-free lives,”¹² while Hal Himmelstein criticizes this utopic viewpoint: “Television’s myth of the suburban middle landscape became an idealized representation of the quality of life of upwardly mobile white Americans divorced from the social infrastructure that allowed that mobility (we are inevitably upwardly mobile at another’s expense).”¹³ Within this 1950s celebration of the nation’s wealth, *Leave It to Beaver* modestly concedes, but never trumpets, the Cleavers’ financial comforts. June acknowledges the rise of the suburbs by referring to Levittown (“Larry’s Club”), and one of the series’ few story lines carrying over separate episodes depicts the family house-hunting for a larger residence (to which they have relocated in the third season’s early episodes, with the boys curiously still sharing a bedroom). In a virtual ode to American prosperity, June soon reports that, according to a real estate agent, the Cleavers could sell their new home for a \$10,000 profit (“The Spot Removers”). The program carefully maintains the Cleavers within the realm of the middle class—as Ward explains, “No, Beaver, we’re not rich. We’re what you might call ‘comfortable’” (“Stocks and Bonds”)—all the better to position them as a defining family of the era and thus to erase the divisions between America’s social classes and any discontents they might foster among the program’s viewers.

While many viewers appreciate *Leave It to Beaver* as a homey, happy time capsule from the 1950s, the program concomitantly announces its modernity.

Its creators present its characters not as relics of the past but as testaments to the changing times, and these themes frustrate chrononormative readings either steeped in nostalgia or lamenting the program's hidebound mores. Most significantly in this regard, despite current evaluations of Ward and June as an unrealistic and outmoded couple of the past, the program depicts their marriage and parenting as progressive and representative of the latest advances in gender relations. In her 1952 volume on child raising, Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg upholds the standard marital division of labor while also encouraging parents to share household responsibilities: "Many young couples realize that at some points the father has to be protected for his main job outside the home, but that at other times he has to protect and help the mother. When both feel responsible toward each other and to their common purpose, their cooperation is functional and flexible rather than set in a fixed pattern of sharply divided and arbitrarily assigned tasks."¹⁴ Such sentiments were reinforced in the popular magazines of the day, such as Otis Lee Wiese's 1954 editorial in *McCall's* that trumpeted, "*Today women are not a sheltered sex. . . . [Parents] are creating this new and warmer way of life not as women alone or men alone, isolated from one another, but as a family sharing a common experience.*"¹⁵ So to judge Ward and June as exemplars of 1950s parenthood necessitates that one query the temporal standards on which such an evaluation rests: those of the program's present or those of today. At the very least, Ward and June's marriage appears in harmony with the progressive visions endorsed by Gruenberg and Wiese, thus encouraging viewers to see their relationship not as a regrettable relic of yesteryear but as a dynamic exemplar of shifting family responsibilities that had been even more sharply divided by gender in the past.

Throughout *Leave It to Beaver*, traditional gender roles and separate domestic spheres are maintained yet progressively expanded, as evident in the semiotic resignification of aprons. Ward often helps June wash the dishes, at times wearing an apron when doing so ("Eddie's Sweater"). From today's perspective such a concession registers as picayune to the point of meaninglessness, yet June's umbrage at the phrase "apron strings" indicates her impatience with maternal stereotypes:

WARD: It's perfectly natural for a kid to want to get away from his mother's apron strings.

JUNE: What do you mean—my apron strings?

WARD: Nothing. That was a poor choice of words. ("Boarding School")

Aprons metonymically capture both the era's shifting gender roles and the crosscurrents in temporalities that undermine chrononormative readings of *Leave It to Beaver*. In this light, the program's various and contradictory

episodes inevitably confirm Leibman's, Newcomb's, and Halberstam's views yet also open interpretive spaces to query rudimentary assumptions of the 1950s sitcom family's overarching normativity.

Along with shifting gender roles that laid the foundation for second-wave feminism in the 1960s, the 1950s was also a time of anxiety and excitement, particularly in regard to the Red Scare, the Space Race, and Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union. Responding to the challenges facing the nation, both Wally and Beaver announce their vocational ambitions in technology, thus establishing the boys as avatars not of yesteryear or even of the present but of the future: Wally aspires to be an electrical engineer and to work on missiles ("Beaver Becomes a Hero"), and Beaver plans his career as a "space scientist" ("Beaver the Caddy"). In another episode, Ward ironically chuckles of his son, "All right. I'll just have to settle for a nuclear scientist instead of an All-American halfback" ("Beaver the Athlete"), and June approvingly mentions the "scientific equipment" the boys have access to at school ("Lumpy Rutherford"). The Cleaver boys see their era as pushing impatiently into the future, such as when, in a promotional tag for the Boy Scouts, Wally praises the group: "They're really up to date." Beaver adds, commenting on the design of the Explorer's Handbook, "Yeah, kind of looks like a rocket ship taking off" ("The Grass Is Always Greener"). To look at *Leave It to Beaver* as a site of chrononormative nostalgia, then, is to overlook both its progressive investments in 1950s family structures and its enthusiasm for modernity and new possibilities, with this tension carrying over into its passing glances at evolving sexual mores and its anxieties over queer children.

Many chrononormative assessments of the 1950s remark on the era's presumed sexual innocence and ascribe the onset of sexual liberation to the 1960s, yet the 1950s planted the seeds of innocence's collapse and rebellion's rise. Joel Foreman, in the introduction to his volume *The Other Fifties: Interrogating Midcentury American Icons*, states his ambition to reorient views of this decade, so that "few Americans would . . . think of the 1950s as either simple, innocent, happy, unanimously supportive of a broad spectrum of beliefs, or radically separated from the 1960s by a culture of complacency."¹⁶ During this decade, television audiences were frequently confronted with such miniscandals as Elvis Presley's hip-shaking performance on *The Ed Sullivan Show* (1948–71) and other rock-and-roll inspired exuberances, while juvenile delinquents were both denigrated as modern scourges and extolled as romantic antiheroes, particularly in the films of James Dean and Marlon Brando. Loosening the era's sexual mores, Hugh Hefner published the first issue of *Playboy* in December 1953, with its influence reverberating in contemporary sitcoms. *The Bob Cummings Show* (1955–59) stars Cummings as Bob Collins, a photographer of beautiful—if clothed—female models, with the program foregrounding his bachelor antics while contrasting his hedonism

with his devoted family life, including his sister Margaret McDonald (Rosemary DeCamp) and her teen son, Chuck (Dwayne Hickman). Chuck marvels at his uncle's lifestyle and desires to emulate him, such as when, learning of Bob's absence, he pants, "His whole harem of beautiful models is unguarded!" ("Grandpa Moves West"). Hickman graduated from *The Bob Cummings Show* to the starring role in *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959–63), in which adolescent Dobie single-mindedly pursues romance, as he explains in an opening monologue: "What bugs me is this—I like girls. What am I saying? I love girls. Love 'em! Beautiful, gorgeous, soft, round, creamy girls" ("Caper at the Bijou"). Dobie's indulgent mother and strict father alternatively encourage and hamper his exploits, yet their steady narrative presence maintains the loose structuring of a family sitcom, thus ensuring that the program does not devolve into a hedonistic ode to the emerging teen culture. With Bob Collins and Dobie Gillis, 1950s television merged the foundational premise of the family sitcom with these characters' pursuits of sexual conquests—a narrative tension that received increasing attention throughout the 1960s in a variety of family-oriented programs.

In line with the changing times and such adult- and teen-centered fare, *Leave It to Beaver* obliquely acknowledges shifting sexual standards, frequently through references to *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* that allow the latter's interest in teen sexuality to seep into the former's story lines. Beaver mentions Wally's attraction to actress Tuesday Weld, who played Dobie's crush Thalia Menninger ("Uncle Billy's Visit"), and Wally's dating life, with such passing romantic interests as Mary Ellen Rogers and Julie Foster, allows the program to stake its appeal to teen viewers and the rising baby boom culture. When June tells Beaver of a slang word ("keen") she used as a teenager, he snickers, "They don't even use that on *Dobie Gillis* anymore" ("One of the Boys"), with this telling swipe at a competing and higher-rated program ironically revealing producers' anxiety that *Leave It to Beaver* would lose its audience if it failed to keep up with the times. *Leave It to Beaver* also acknowledges cinema's increasingly risqué fare. Eddie Haskell asks if Wally is going to wear a homburg hat while attending a movie expressly for adults ("Wally's Glamour Girl")—a sly hint at stag films, with Eddie himself, in Darrell Hamamoto's phrasing, serving "as the necessary dramatic foil to the pure and noble sentiments of the Cleaver household."¹⁷ When June looks in the newspaper for an appropriate film for the boys, she is surprised by the offerings at the local theater: "*Flowers of Spring*. Now that sounds like a happy picture. Oh dear . . . Adults only. Filmed in Sweden" ("Beaver's Old Buddy"). "Sweden"—virtually a synecdoche for erotic films, if not precisely for pornography—captures all that *Leave It to Beaver* cannot address yet nonetheless does, if only to reject it.

Such hints of America's shifting heterosexual mores do not necessitate that *Leave It to Beaver* would address homosexuality, and, a prevailing

chrononormative assumption concerning early television asserts that homosexuality was rarely depicted onscreen. Again, while this simplistic assumption bears much merit, it erases the intriguing queer subcurrents in an array of programs, such as Milton Berle's crossdressing humor, Ernie Kovacs's mincing as Percy Dovetonsils (a telling caricature of Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote), and Liberace's own program and his frequent appearances on variety shows. Looking at the era's occluded yet surprisingly frequent depictions of gay characters and personalities, Amy Villarejo calls for a "more robust and rich sense of the queer [television] archive," citing as necessary interventions into popular culture's queer history such performers as Agnes Moorehead, Paul Lynde, and Nancy Kulp and such programs as *Private Secretary* (1953–57), *Our Miss Brooks* (radio 1948–57; television 1952–56), and even *Father Knows Best*.¹⁸ Queer characters and queer actors played a significant role in television's history, yet one must look to the margins of their programs to find what lies hidden while standing in plain sight in order to undo the tyranny of chrononormativity.

Beaver's Queer Present

A queer archive of 1950s television, in line with Villarejo's call, should also include *Leave It to Beaver* owing to its insistent thematizing of Ward's fear of a queer Beaver, as the boy's misadventures consistently highlight his propensity for homosocial companionship to an extent that worries his father. At the very least, Stockton's formulation of the queer child "growing sideways" echoes 1950s sociologists' concern for children of the era. Sociologist Gertrude Chittenden, while not explicitly outlining the possibility of gay children, fears that American children are faltering in their sexual development: "The American adolescent may emerge an unsure, confused child confronted with many important choices, in some instances in conflict with his parents and unprepared to accept his own sex role."¹⁹ Chittenden's words readily apply to Beaver, for he doggedly insists on his distaste for girls throughout most of the series (although hints of heteroerotic interest blossom toward the end of its run). Beaver's boyish distaste for feminine companionship does not in itself construct the character's queerness, yet it is merely one of many signs that the process of growing up into presumed heterosexuality takes numerous detours through realms feminine, antifeminine, and intensely homosocial.

Beaver's queer boyishness is juxtaposed sharply with Wally's more successful masculinity throughout the series, thus establishing both the gentle tension in their relationship and Ward's fears concerning his younger son. For example, Wally's repeated triumphs in sports overshadow Beaver's hobbies of clarinet and ice-skating, which places the boys at opposing ends of a gendered continuum. They are often costumed to accentuate their differences as well,

such as in the “Beaver’s Short Pants” episode, in which Beaver is humiliated by the clothes he is expected to wear, whereas Wally’s costuming accentuates his normative boyhood masculinity (fig. 1.1). In a particularly effeminizing sequence, Beaver buys “Glama-Spray Miracle Mist” to tame his sheepdog hair, despite the saleswoman cautioning him against purchasing a woman’s product (“Beaver, the Sheep Dog”). Child psychologists of the 1950s expressly warned parents against dance lessons for boys, lest they raise a sissy, as in Barney Katz’s formulation: “But the boy who has long been and continues to be girlish, a sissy, is made that way by the handling of his parents. . . . They dress him in fancy clothes, keep his curls longs, and give him dancing lessons.”²⁰ More than simply casting him within the effete realm of Terpsichore, Beaver’s dancing lessons ironically afford him the opportunity to privilege homosocial, rather than heterosocial, pastimes. “As long as I’m going to be stuck here, I’m going to dance with another boy,” he declares (“Wally’s Girl Trouble”), and he tells June, in response to a question about his brother, “Well, I don’t know. All I ever dance with at dancing school is other guys” (“Wally’s New Suit”; cf. “Dance Contest”). Beaver tells his friend Gus, the auxiliary firehouse attendant, “If I do get married, I’m not getting married to a girl!” (“The Black Eye”). Games of make-believe with his male friends similarly allow Beaver to enjoy gender’s malleability, such as when his pal Richard tells him as they wait for the laundry, “You be the wife, and I’ll be the husband, and then we can fight like our parents do” (“Beaver’s Laundry”).



FIGURE 1.1 Clothes unmake and make the man, as evident in Beaver’s queer positioning in relation to Wally (“Beaver’s Short Pants”).

To argue that Beaver's preference for male dancing partners and other such pastimes indicates his latent homosexuality would be to extrapolate wildly from the program's obvious intentions, yet to deny this reading entirely would overlook the fact that Ward worries about his son's gender identity. On one occasion, Beaver admits to his father that he ran away from a fight, and Ward confesses to June, "It frightens me a little . . . a boy running away"—and even more effeminizing is that Beaver's nemesis Violet Rutherford gave him his black eye ("The Black Eye"). Ward similarly remarks after Beaver attends an exclusively female party: "Well, now I am confused. A boy that age going to an all-girl party and enjoying himself. That little character is beginning to worry me" ("Party Invitation").²¹ Beaver surprises his family by announcing his appreciation of dancing school, and Ward frets, "When a boy his age suddenly says he likes dancing school, he's either covering up for something he's done, or he's downright abnormal!" ("Beaver's First Date"). Also, when his son is cast as a canary in a school play, Ward grumbles that the boy should play an eagle instead, while June, with words also hinting at their child's queerness, approves of his performance: "You know, Ward, he was so sweet, it almost makes up for not having a girl" ("School Play"). Beaver consistently vocalizes his distaste for girls—"Imagine anybody dumb enough to go steady with a girl"—and when Wally asks Beaver whom he would date, he doggedly replies, "I don't know, but it sure wouldn't be a girl," with the reaction shot of Ward—eyes glazed, chin and lips tense—capturing his consternation over his son's potential homosexuality ("Wally's Test"; see fig. 1.2). Most of these moments are played for the humor of a young boy's irrational dislike of girls or are based on misunderstandings among the characters, yet they concomitantly stage the queer trajectory of Beaver's maturation and the pleasure he finds in his childish rejection of the heteronormative imperative.

While *Leave It to Beaver* stages a young boy's distaste for girls and his preference for homosocial companionship, surely viewers are intended to interpret the series' overarching story line as Beaver's maturation into heteroerotic adolescence—his "growing sideways" as he "grows up." And to this end a new vision of Beaver appears in the series' final season: football champion ("Beaver, the Hero"), surfing enthusiast ("The Late Edition"), and even a junior Romeo, for which Wally chastises him: "A kid like you isn't supposed to go running around like Frank Sinatra" ("More Blessed to Give"). But these hints of incipient heteronormativity cannot undo the previous five seasons of Beaver's antieroticism; thus, the series as a whole stages the torturous paths of sexual maturation and the comic potential in resisting heteronormativity. In these persistent images of Beaver as a queer child, *Leave It to Beaver* no more endorses homosexuality than it endorses bestiality or incest, although the series comically flirts with these taboo topics as well. In the series' first season, Ward introduces in voice-over the themes of several episodes, and for one he

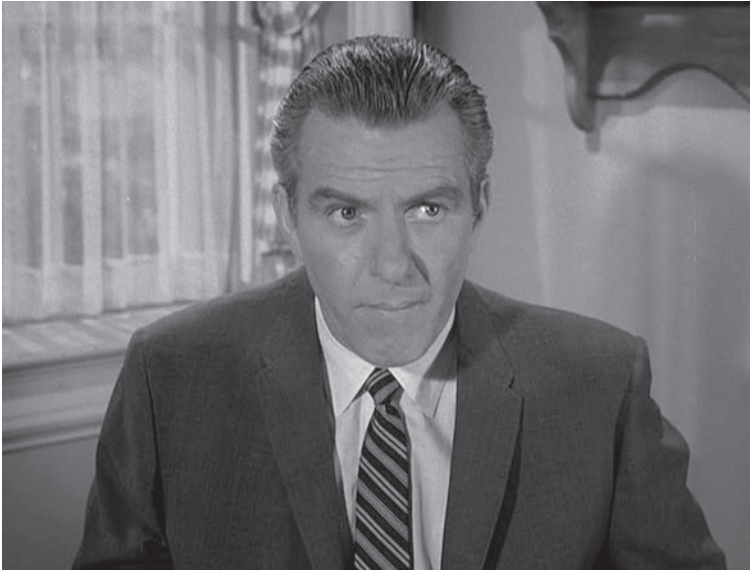


FIGURE 1.2 Ward's reaction shot captures his fear: more than a sissy, his son might just be gay ("Wally's Test").

warmly intones, "and the first time you fall in love, it's not always with a girl," as the camera frames Beaver gazing adoringly at, as the cut reveals, an alligator ("Captain Jack"). Also, planning his future romantic life, Beaver affirms, "But I'm not going to marry any silly girls. I'm going to marry a mother," with his words hinting at his unresolved Oedipal attachment to June ("Dance Contest"). The gaps and fissures of heteronormativity are continually revealed in Beaver's six-year narrative arc, yet even if one concedes that an ultimately conservative and chrononormative vision triumphs, Ward's story line further complicates the notion that "growing sideways" can ever result in an untroubled sense of gendered and erotic wholeness.

Ward's Queer Past

As mentioned previously, chrononormative visions of 1950s domestic sitcoms identify a benevolent *pater familias* as the privileged site of ideological authority, yet it is critical to note the fault lines in this view as well, for these programs frequently dramatize the limits of paternal governance: if father truly knew best in the 1950s, he would likely have made far fewer mistakes, which appear so regularly and in such a variety of programs that they can hardly be considered anomalies. Illustrative examples include when, in *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, Ozzie advises his son David, who frequently helps friends and neighbors in need, that "sometimes generosity and doing nice things for

people can be overdone”; David agrees to rebuff such pleas in the future, yet Ozzie soon realizes his error when his son refuses to assist him with a favor for their neighbor Thorny (“The Fall Guy”). In *Father Knows Best*, Jim Anderson promises to take his elder daughter, Betty, to a football game but then reneges so that he can take an important client instead, only for his younger daughter, Kathy, to chastise him: “You must never break a promise to a child, Daddy” (“Football Tickets”). Jim’s wife, Margaret (Jane Wyatt), taking Betty into her confidences, sighs, “Oh, it’s not that I don’t think your father has wonderful ideas. It’s just that, well, they don’t work” (“Live My Own Life”). After watching several episodes of *Father Knows Best*, one finds it difficult not to hear a distinct irony in the title, for this father is as likely to benefit from the episode’s moral as much as, if not more than, his wife and children. Despite the widespread vision of Ward Cleaver as a faultless father of 1950s and 1960s television, he similarly embodies both patriarchal authority and men’s inherent incapacity to govern their families effectively.

As Beaver matures from childhood queerness into a presumably normative adolescence, Ward, in complementary contrast, models the likely possibility of a father psychologically stunted from his boyhood. Numerous episodes characterize him more as a little boy, as yet another of June’s children, than as her adult spouse. When Wally and Beaver shirk their painting job to gawk at a lumberyard fire, Ward decides he, too, must see it. “Once a boy, always a boy,” June laments (“Wally’s Job”), and she also calls him one of her “three babies” (“Beaver’s Short Pants”). Indeed, Ward’s ability to think like a child is frequently lauded as a marker of his superior parenting skills, such as when June defends the boys—“Just because they’re quiet, it doesn’t mean they’re up to something”—yet Ward better understands the meanings of silence: “It always did when I was a boy” (“Beaver’s Cat Problem”). In a plotline in which June hopes that Beaver will voluntarily surrender his pet monkey, Ward sympathizes with his son, envisioning himself as an eternal child: “I don’t want to think like a father; I want to think like a kid” (“Beaver’s Monkey”). In these and numerous other such scenes, Ward’s strength as a father emerges from his deep recollection of his own childhood. Yet the father cannot physically be the child—some of chrononormativity’s dictates are impossible to ignore—so Ward’s performance of father-as-eternal-child increasingly subverts any vision of patriarchal authority he attempts to embody. Moreover, while often heralding Ward’s deep understanding of childhood, *Leave It to Beaver* also ponders the undesirability of a Peter Pan vision of masculinity, such as when Ward himself states: “You know, the sad thing is there are some men my age who are still trying to be little boys” (“Beaver’s Old Buddy”). Both adult father and child-as-father, Ward symbolizes the privileges of an adult masculinity that can shuffle between past and present to better raise his children, yet *Leave It to Beaver* also trips over this inherent contradiction in patriarchal authority.

This paradox of Ward's character as man and child is broached repeatedly in story lines touching on themes of domestic violence and child abuse. Recent analyses in television studies have queried long-standing views of 1950s family sitcoms as honeyed fare, with T. J. Jackson Lears arguing that "the bland surfaces of suburban normality, the way of life celebrated in *Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave It to Beaver*, concealed an abyss of aggression"²² and Erin Lee Mock detailing how the threat of violence bubbles up frequently in family sitcoms of the 1950s. Using Desi Arnaz's Ricky Ricardo of *I Love Lucy* (1951–57) as her prototype, Mock explores how "sitcom husbands . . . are crafted after his raging model, with varying degrees of subtlety."²³ Mock cites *Leave It to Beaver's* first episode to include Ward among her examples: Beaver, mistakenly believing he has been expelled from school, hides from his parents up a tree. Fearing his father, Beaver refuses to leave his hideout—"I'm not coming down. You'll hit me." Ward initially appears to agree with his son about his violent proclivities ("Well, you just better—") but then testily tempers his anger: "Beaver, you know we never hit you" ("Beaver Gets 'Spelled"). In a later episode, Beaver cautions Wally about their father, "Yeah, you wouldn't want to get him in a hitting mood" ("Wally's Car").

A wider sampling of the program, however, reveals that these hints of Ward's violent parenting are more an anomaly than a trope, with the threat of corporal punishment more frequently diffused into the homes of Beaver's and Wally's friends, particularly Larry Mondello, Lumpy Rutherford, and Eddie Haskell. For example, Beaver mentions to Wally that Larry's father hits him (Larry) for misbehaving and then states of their father: "You know, Wally, I'm glad we don't have a hitting father" ("School Bus"). Beaver also asserts that Larry's father "walloped" his son for playing hooky ("Beaver Plays Hooky"), and Larry nonchalantly verifies his father's violent tendencies—"Sure he hit me" ("Borrowed Boat"). Lumpy Rutherford admits casually, "If I disappoint my daddy, smack! Right in the mouth" ("Wally's Track Meet"). While this undercurrent of child abuse should not simply be shrugged off, the majority of these scenes exaggerate the tenor of any violence. Surely *hit* registers as a synonym for *spank* on most occasions, and as Michael Kassel muses rhetorically, the children of Mayfield, while by no means represented as delinquents, repeatedly transgress their parents' dictates: "If the goal of *Leave It to Beaver* was to venerate the white middle class, why would the series allow for that environment to produce not only Eddie Haskell, but other problem children, including Clarence 'Lumpy' Rutherford, Larry Mondello, and Gilbert Bates?"²⁴ Furthermore, many of the children's discussions of abuse exploit this exaggeration for the comedic purpose of presenting the world through a child's vantage point (as much as more contemporary views of child abuse have muffled any humorous edges it may have held). Certainly, Ward and June do not see themselves as abusive parents. When June explains that Beaver was

“naturally” embarrassed to tell them about a problem, Ward replies, “What’s so natural about it? Are we monsters? Do we hit him? Do we beat him?” Ward’s words indicate that they do not hit or beat their child, and June further explains, “Ward, the only guide the little fellow has is the love and approval of his parents. Now, if he thinks he’s lost that, it’s worse than a beating” (“The Haircut”).

From this perspective, child abuse lingers in the subconscious of *Leave It to Beaver*—if the metaphor of a television program’s subconscious is allowed—for more than depicting Ward as a violent father, the program shows that the specter of parental violence haunts him. Whereas the question of whether Ward has ever spanked Beaver engenders ambiguity and obfuscation, it is clear that Ward’s father tormented him and his siblings with crippling corporal punishments. Ward tells June, “Dear, when I was a kid, if I had even implied to my father that I didn’t have the best parents in the world, he’d have taken me right out to the woodshed and proved to me that I did” (“Beaver Gets Adopted”). The other Cleavers acknowledge the violence of Ward’s upbringing, such as when Beaver consoles him, “Oh, yeah, you had a hitting dad, didn’t you?” (“Beaver’s Freckles”), and Ward wryly recalls his father’s violence, which contributed to a cold atmosphere in their home: “My father had a very practical shortcut to child psychology: a razor strap. Sure cut down on the conversation around our house” (“Ward’s Golf Clubs”). Haunted by his painful childhood, Ward nevertheless adumbrates the desirability of abusing children for its supposed efficacy. In another recollection of his childhood beatings, Ward states, “My father would take me out for a little walk to the toolshed. It’s amazing how just looking at that toolshed would take all of the rebellion out of me”; while June hopes Beaver will not require such drastic punishment, Ward counters, “If it doesn’t work, I’m afraid I’m going to have to fall back on that toolshed psychology” (“The Silent Treatment”). The phrase “toolshed psychology” encapsulates the program’s inability to consistently advocate for a particular style of child raising, for it is torn between the supposed efficacy of violence and the modern call to understand one’s children, as it is also set between the traumas of Ward’s past and the domestic frustrations of his present.

As an effect of these narrative crosscurrents, Ward emblemizes the impossibility of psychic wholeness and its queer repercussions, for he is a father trapped by the patriarchal regimes in which he was raised. Certainly, psychoanalysis is itself haunted, if also inspired, by the figure of the beaten child, beginning with Sigmund Freud’s foundational proposition: “It is surprising how often people who seek analytic treatment for hysteria or an obsessional neurosis confess to having indulged in the phantasy: ‘A child is being beaten.’”²⁵ The beaten child sparks the need for psychoanalytic therapy, yet as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari explore in their critique of Freudian thought, the

father's paradoxical role in psychic coherency contains its own undoing: "So it is that psychoanalysis has much difficulty extracting itself from an infinite regression: the father must have been a child, but was able to be a child only in relation to a father, who was himself a child, in relation to another father."²⁶ Within the realms of Freudian thought and much chrononormative television criticism, Ward models the psychic wholeness of the father who has overcome the traumas of his past, yet from Deleuzian-Guattarian, antichrononormative, and queer perspectives, he simultaneously models the fracturing of consciousness implicitly structured through the repetitions of patriarchal history and the impossibility of closing this violent cycle.

So while chrononormative readings of 1950s sitcom morality stress the ways in which fathers teach their children important life lessons, Ward inverts this role on numerous episodes, for he is the abused child of *Leave It to Beaver's* subconscious who has grown sideways into adulthood and is simply incapable of resolving many of the family's conflicts. To cite all of the episodes in which Ward learns an important lesson by the narrative's end would quickly devolve into an exhaustive plot summary of the series, so these four examples must stand as representative of his consistently faulty parenting:

- "You know, June, I think I've learned something from all this. To take our kids as they are, not wish they were something else, or try to make them like ourselves. It doesn't work." ("Part Time Genius")
- "Just got to tell them I flew off the handle and made a fool of myself," Ward realizes, to which June sympathetically replies, "Don't look so sad, dear. That's just one of the hazards of being a father." ("Beaver's Bad Day")
- "Um, well, I guess I made a mistake, Beaver. I guess I was so anxious to be right that I kind of forgot what it felt like when I was a little boy." ("Beaver Runs Away")
- "June, I made a mistake today a lot of fathers make. I put so much pressure on the Beaver about not disappointing me that all he could do was break down." ("The Tooth")

These passages reveal that much of the wisdom imparted in the program arises from Beaver himself, who allows Ward the opportunity to reassess his views of adulthood and of childhood that were seared into his psyche through his father's violence. By reversing the channels of wisdom anticipated by chrononormativity, *Leave It to Beaver* introduces a carnivalesque and comic air into its story lines, for viewers simply cannot expect adult authority to render reasonable judgments and must then turn to the child for guidance, despite Beaver's own questionable, always "sideways," maturation. Developing these themes, several episodes feature Beaver and his father making similar mistakes

and facing similar comeuppances: Beaver moans, “I wish I were dead” after his bike, which he failed to register, is stolen, with Ward echoing his son’s cry when June learns that Ward failed to insure it (“Beaver’s Bike”). In “Beaver Takes a Drive,” Beaver’s antics culminate with the Cleavers in a courtroom, where the judge chastises Ward for his failure to responsibly discipline his children. The episode ends with Beaver and Ward sulking together—with their arms crossed, Beaver looking glumly ahead, Ward casting his eyes down—thus undermining Ward’s performance of paternal authority and reminding viewers of the carnivalesque fantasy of a normative family (fig. 1.3).

As Ward’s backstory indicates that he has traveled a tortuous path from childhood to adulthood, his performance of paternal heteronormativity affords viewers the opportunity to see the innumerable chinks in the psychological wholeness ostensibly promised by white patriarchal governance. So while many viewers assume that Beaver will mature into adolescent heterosexuality although they must also remember his queer moments of “growing sideways,” Ward’s prepaternal years likewise contain hints of homosociality and male pleasures divorced from the fetters of heteronormativity. When Beaver opens Ward’s army chest, he finds a photograph of his father wearing a grass skirt, baring his midriff, and, because it is unclear which of the two men Beaver identifies as Ward, either leaning on his male friend or being leaned on by his male friend. Beaver cries out in disbelief: “These aren’t ladies. These are guys. And one of ‘em’s dad!” (“Beaver’s Hero”; see fig. 1.4). But of course, Ward was



FIGURE 1.3 Ward and Beaver sit dejectedly on the couch together, both father and son frustrated by the strictures of authority (“Beaver Takes a Drive”).



FIGURE 1.4 Beaver finds photographic evidence that Ward “grew sideways” into heterosexuality, as evident from the homosocial and gender-bending pleasures of his past (“Beaver’s Hero”). This photograph does not actually appear to be of Hugh Beaumont, and the episode’s editing only allows a brief glance at it, yet Beaver identifies one of these men as his father, Ward.

not yet Beaver’s father at the moment when this war photo was taken, so the boy’s surprised view of his father’s past disrupts the linearity of time and its chrononormative promises. Other than his childhood of paternal abuse and this homosocial romp during the war, viewers know little of Ward’s history, yet the psychological fracturing evident in his simultaneous performances of father and of eternal child undo the 1950s vision of the faultless patriarch and reveal instead his queer discontents and his unresolved desires, cloaked under a mantle of suburban respectability.

June’s Queer Future

Formulating an enduring chrononormative assumption of 1950s family sitcoms, scholars have long highlighted the genre’s conservative gender politics that positions the husband’s ultimate authority over his wife. Denouncing the conservative sexual politics of early television programs, Bonnie Dow argues that “the controlling value of patriarchal authority is evident in 1950s sitcoms like *Leave It to Beaver*. . . , in which the correct resolution of a problem inevitably follows the wisdom of the father.”²⁷ Matthew Henry echoes this viewpoint: “Atop the nuclear family was posited a patriarchy in which the father was portrayed as knowing, correct, and superior to his wife and children, a

structure that worked to reinforce the prevalent sexual stereotypes.”²⁸ Diana Meehan taxonomizes the maternal characters of family sitcoms as the “good-wife” figure, whose “only interest was family and house, the focus of all meaningful action,”²⁹ and Susan Douglas excoriates the 1950s image of maternity in its endless array of “wasp-waisted, perfectly coiffed moms who never lost their temper.”³⁰ Such observations, common to criticism of 1950s sitcoms, are both demonstrably true yet limited in their accuracy, particularly in their failure to recognize the genre’s comedic and carnivalesque nature, in which the “world turned upside down” highlights the limits of masculine governance and the pleasures of feminine resistance. A father ruling his family competently affords fewer comedic moments than his failing to do so as the mother then intervenes to save the day, with this queer trope of gender reversals prevalent throughout television’s early years.

In contrast to the paternal focus of such sitcoms as *Father Knows Best* and *Make Room for Daddy*, domestic sitcoms such as *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (1950–58), *I Love Lucy*, and *I Married Joan* (1952–55) direct the audience’s attention to the husband and wife dyad, and while the husbands typically restore order following Gracie’s, Lucy’s, and Joan’s comic excess, the women’s transgressions establish a narrative pattern of flouting patriarchal authority and insulting their husbands’ masculinity. With breathless naiveté, Gracie mocks George’s gender: “George, you’re my husband. I don’t think of you as a man” (“Chapter 2”). On another occasion a guest at the door declares, “I saw a man in the house,” to which Gracie replies, “No, you didn’t. That was George” (“Chapter 5”). Resisting the stifling constraints of marriage, Lucy (Lucille Ball) complains to her friend Ethel (Vivian Vance): “Ever since we said, ‘I do,’ there are so many things we don’t” (“The Girls Want to Go to a Nightclub”). In a memorable exchange between Joan (Joan Davis) and her husband Brad (Jim Backus), Brad asserts his authority alliteratively—“And as your husband, what I have to say is positive, precise, and permanent”—but Joan simply bats away his pretensions: “And as your wife, what I have to say is pooh, pah, and poppycock. And back to pooh” (“Joan’s Haircut”). The visual iconography of the show’s opening credits, with Davis standing alone in her bridal gown while giving a kiss to the tiny groom figure from her wedding cake, establishes her as the program’s focal point, and through Davis’s energetic performances Joan proves her physical superiority over Brad, in one instance dipping him for a kiss (“Changing Houses”).

Yet as much as Gracie, Lucy, and Joan undercut masculine authority, these programs concentrate on the humorous dynamics between husband and wife more than among broader families, and the father’s role as domestic authority is heightened, while similarly undermined, in programs depicting a nuclear family. *The Donna Reed Show* (1958–63) illuminates these shifts, as Donna Reed, an Oscar-winning actress for *From Here to Eternity* (1954), took

her cinematic star power to the small screen, playing the role of Donna Stone, wife of Dr. Alex Stone and mother of Mary and Jeff. While Reed's role is more maternal and demure than Allen's, Ball's, and Davis's, numerous episodes allow her to combat masculine prerogatives. Following a hiking trip with her son and his friends, she says of a forest ranger overly solicitous to set up her camp: "Well, he was a very obliging man . . . but he was just a little bit condescending, like some other men I know" ("The Hike"). Also, in a community playhouse performance, Donna plays the role of Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. With this allusion to a classic prefeminist text of women's need for independence, *The Donna Reed Show* encodes a critique of crippling domesticity as it simultaneously celebrates Donna's transcendence of the limitations of married life ("Pardon My Gloves"). As these cursory examples attest, the presumption of husbandly authority is both a reality and an illusion in 1950s sitcoms, continually undermined by comic women who refuse to cede their pleasures to their grumpy spouse's purported authority.

June Cleaver represents a vision of 1950s womanhood that contrasts with Gracie, Lucy, Joan, and Donna: whereas these protagonists typically direct an episode's plotline, June more often stands to the side of the narrative action and offers maternal warmth while her sons and husband confront the quotidian challenges of suburban life. Sociologists of the 1950s such as James Bossard and Eleanor Boll noted a transition in the United States from adult-centered to child-centered families, documenting "a radical change in the whole idea of the child's relative place in the family," such that "one finds a tendency, first, toward more 'child-centered' ritual, and, second, toward a change in the emphasis of the content of the family rituals which function as control or education, from one of narrowly channelizing behavior to one of liberating and guiding potentialities."³¹ These sociological shifts took root in the era's sitcoms privileging children for their titular and narrative focus, in such shows as *Dennis the Menace* (1959–63) and, of course, *Leave It to Beaver*. Placing greater narrative emphasis on Beaver and Wally, and also on Ward in his authoritarian role, *Leave It to Beaver* leaves less narrative space for June, yet she has paradoxically become the program's defining figure in much of the cultural imaginary. In the strange alchemy of television reception, June Cleaver stands as a cultural icon both cherished and regretted, such as in Bonnie Mann's declaration that baby boomers "find June Cleaver etched so deeply in our collective sociosymbolic psyche that we are as haunted by her, I suspect, as by our real mothers."³² Various studies of women and motherhood deploy June Cleaver as a cultural touchstone against which they rebel. For a scholarly audience of historians, Joanne Meyerowitz expands the vision of women's post-War World II experience in her *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America, 1945–1960*.³³ Appealing to a popular readership, Deborah Werksman gleefully offers *I Killed June Cleaver: Modern Moms Shatter the Myth of Perfect*

Parenting, and Anne Dunnewold consoles overstressed parents with *Even June Cleaver Would Forget the Juice Box: Cut Yourself Some Slack (And Still Raise Great Kids) in the Age of Extreme Parenting*.³⁴ Beaver, Wally, and Ward, while integral members of the cast, lack June's enduring presence and legacy, in a surprising reformulation of the program's cultural meaning throughout its post-1950s reception.

June's mythic status appears largely to be an unlikely consequence of costuming choices, in the incongruity between her clothing (pearls and elegant dresses) and her domestic chores (cleaning the house and cooking meals). The excess of her attire thus serves as a metonym for the excess of the character: with apologies for the anachronistic allusion, June Cleaver is simply too much the Stepford housewife, too much the image of domestic perfection, even more so than her contemporaries. It is somewhat ironic, then, that this image of the well-dressed, pearl-bedecked housewife defines June Cleaver, for Billingsley states that these costuming decisions resulted not from the writers' vision of the character but were necessary owing to her neckline and height. Of the necklace she explains that "the pearls I wear because I have a hollow in my neck," with Jerry Mathers elaborating: "when they went to film her, the two muscles in her neck . . . caused a shadow." Billingsley further affirms that "it was very difficult to photograph. We didn't have as good of cameras, we didn't have as good of film," as she also elaborates on her character's footwear: "I used flat shoes when the kids were little, and as the darn kids grew, they put me in high heels."³⁵ Perhaps Billingsley and Mathers protest too much in these declarations: shadows, which the directors so strenuously resisted depicting in Billingsley's neck, appear frequently throughout the program, breaking the illusion of the show's reality. Still, to focus primarily on Billingsley's excessive costuming is to decontextualize the program's, and the era's, attention to formalities in dress, which appears in numerous scenes. June's pearls and heels are patently unrealistic, yet little more so than Wally doing pushups in pants and a button-down shirt ("The Pipe"), the family wearing formal attire to an alligator park ("Captain Jack"), or boys wearing coats and ties to a football game ("Brotherly Love").

If one looks past June's pearls, *Leave It to Beaver* stages several moments adumbrating women's frustration with sexism and the fragility of gender as a social construct, particularly following World War II and the Korean War, as these conflicts overturned traditional gender roles when so many men and fathers fought and died overseas and, consequently, so many women were needed to "man" factories and to financially support their families. As Beaver's class plans a father-son picnic, June notes pointedly that "women aren't allowed unless they're fathers," thereby disintegrating gender distinctions between parents and alluding to the necessity of single mothers (presumably widows) to serve as fathers ("Ward's Problem"). When Ward admits that his

golf club prohibits women and children on Saturdays, June counters tartly, “I don’t think you should belong to a golf club that takes a warped attitude like that” (“Lonesome Beaver”). She also pointedly reminds her son, “Well, Beaver, today girls can be doctors and lawyers, too, you know. They’re just as ambitious as boys are” (“Beaver’s I.Q.”). In an exposition about gender roles and the separate spheres of men and women, Ward explains the Cleavers’ labor division as it pertains to their family cookout: “Women do all right when they have all the modern conveniences. But us men are better at this rugged type of outdoor cooking. Sort of a throwback to caveman days. Hand me those asbestos gloves, would you, Wally?” The episode’s canned laughter alerts home viewers to Ward’s hypocrisy, as he then genially concedes his appreciation for feminized modern conveniences: “Well, there’s no sense in us cavemen burning our hands” (“Beaver’s Guest”). Such moments do not recast *Leave It to Beaver* as a progressive intervention into 1950s gender politics, for the separate spheres of masculine authority and feminine domesticity are underscored more frequently than they are undermined, but sufficient subversions emerge to complicate the vision of June Cleaver as the archetypal housewife of popular consciousness.

Furthermore, in focusing on June Cleaver as a regressive avatar of 1950s womanhood, critics overlook the fact that Billingsley, a twice remarried mother of two children, raised her family during an era notably hostile to working women, even earning top billing in the show’s credits over Hugh Beaumont. So while June Cleaver can imagine nothing more terrifying than her son potentially dating a high-school dropout—“She might even be a divorcee!” she cries in alarm (“Box Office Attraction”)—Billingsley deconstructs the 1950s vision of domesticity that she portrays. Of course, the actress is not the character she assumes, yet typecasting—the chrononormative bane of actors, which defines them as forever suitable for only one type of role—affects, even effects in a manner, the actors of family sitcoms more so than most other performers. Thus, the disjunction between Billingsley and Cleaver proves the lie of June’s perfection through Billingsley’s real-life flouting of gendered decorum, allowing a hint of queer tension between June’s fastidious wholesomeness and Billingsley’s star persona.

Typecast as June Cleaver and thus trapped in a 1950s bubble, Billingsley rebooted her career in the 1980s by alternately solidifying and shattering the gendered bonds of chrononormativity, further exploiting the queer potential submerged in her defining role. She returned to the screen as June Cleaver in the television movie *Still the Beaver* (1983) and its follow-up series *The New Leave It to Beaver* (1983–89), proving the enduring appeal of this character, as well as playing the Cleavers’ starchy Aunt Martha in the feature film *Leave It to Beaver* (1997). Prior to and concurrent with these parts, Billingsley was cast in numerous roles in which June Cleaver serves as the satiric base for a

character who disproves the normative facade of 1950s suburban motherhood. In her comeback role as Jive Lady in *Airplane!* (1980), Billingsley appears as a June Cleaver-esque passenger who translates African American dialect for a hapless flight attendant. “Oh, stewardess, I speak jive,” she politely yet improbably volunteers, as she then becomes exasperated with the two black men she hopes to assist: “Jive ass dude don’t got no brains anyhow.” Several 1980s and 1990s television programs employed Billingsley in a similar manner: to subvert the illusion of white, maternal, suburban femininity she so effortlessly presents. Whether as a witch in the forgettable television movie *Bay Coven* (1987), the sugary-sweet mother of hard-charging principal Grace Musso in *Parker Lewis Can’t Lose* (1990–93), or as an alcoholic psychic singing “I’m Just a Girl Who Can’t Say No” in the series *Mysterious Ways* (2000–2002, “Handshake”), Billingsley’s non-June Cleaver roles riff on her June Cleaver past to remind viewers of its impossibility. In fact, many of Billingsley’s roles outside of *The New Leave It to Beaver* are simply credited as June Cleaver: in *Amazing Stories* (1985), *Baby Boom* (1988), and *Hi Honey, I’m Home* (1991–92). In each of these programs, the illusion of sugar-coated domesticity is questioned, if not satirized, with Billingsley’s performances capitalizing on perceptions of her Cleaver roots.

In her most memorably queer return to a family sitcom, Billingsley played June Cleaver in *Roseanne*’s “All about Rosey” episode. In this extended and metanarrative dialogue with past sitcoms, Roseanne (Roseanne Barr) encounters June Cleaver and four other famous television mothers: Ruth Martin (June Lockhart) of *Lassie* (1954–74), Joan Nash (Pat Crowley) of *Please Don’t Eat the Daisies* (1965–67), Louise Jefferson (Isabel Sanford) of *The Jeffersons* (1975–85), and Norma Arnold (Alley Mills) of *The Wonder Years* (1988–93).³⁶ Assuming the chrononormative values of their characters, the actresses voice their disdain both for *Roseanne* and for Roseanne, with “Joan Nash” speaking to the necessity of maintaining the sanctity of television’s “family hour”: “Oh, my. I’m glad I don’t stay up past nine.” “Louise Jefferson” riffs on her show’s theme song of upward mobility, which tells how her family rose from a lower-class neighborhood to a “deluxe apartment in the sky,” and then huffs, “We moved on up to get away from people like you.” After a flashback to the episode featuring Roseanne overindulging on marijuana with her husband and sister, “Joan Nash” complains, “But that’s the wrong image for a TV mom,” and “June Cleaver” summarizes her distaste: “I don’t like any of this. Why, girls kissing girls and foul language and teenage sex.” Rebuffing their reprimands, Roseanne states, “On my show, I’m the boss, and father knows squat”—thereby rewriting the patriarchally inflected titles of the family sitcoms *Who’s the Boss?* (1984–92) and *Father Knows Best*. Roseanne then admits that her sitcom tackles controversial story lines, and Barr emerges from character to focus on the economic payoffs she receives for her efforts: “Yeah, I know. That stuff’s

kinda bad, but you guys wanna hear how much money I make?” The women huddle together as she whispers, as they then gasp, with “June Cleaver” stating, “Why, I’d make out with a chick for that kind of dough,” and “Louise Jefferson” quickly agreeing, “Anyone of you. Right now.” The episode does not follow through on this proposed sitcom-mom, lesbian make-out session, yet it highlights the ways in which the actors playing these beloved TV mothers would gladly liberate themselves from the narrative conventions of the past to join Barr in her lucrative revisions to its sexual politics. As Billingsley flirts with June Cleaver’s pecuniary and lesbian desires, the impossibility of 1950s chrononormativity is undone, and the queer potential of an archetypally resonant character springs to view (fig. 1.5).

After six years of Beaver’s shenanigans, Ward’s seesawing efforts at fatherhood, and June’s immaculate housekeeping, *Leave It to Beaver* concludes with a flashback episode culminating in its final joke. Ward tells June of their sons, “They’re practically grown men,” as the camera cuts to the boys playing with one of Beaver’s childhood toys that had long been packed away in storage (“Family Scrapbook”). This enduring image of one of television’s leading families, then, posits the false allure of “growing up” and the boundless pleasure of “growing sideways,” in which Beaver and Wally reject, at least in this



FIGURE 1.5 A lesbian June Cleaver? Surrounded by Roseanne Barr and other famous TV sitcom moms, Barbara Billingsley wears the pearls and other exaggerated accouterments of late 1950s domestic femininity that semiotically denote June Cleaver. In so doing, Billingsley further erodes the 1950s model of suburban maternity that defined her career, through a queer revisioning of the character’s sexual politics.

moment, time's chrononormative teleology. Even though the characters' long-term heterosexual identities and familial affections are never in doubt, Beaver's present, Ward's past, and June's future allow for queer readings of a television series, both in its story lines and in much of its critical reception, that brooked little room for deviations from 1950s norms yet expands temporally outward to suggest the surprising paths taken when family members "grow sideways." These queer subtexts, evident in a program that ran during television's early and ostensibly innocent years, attest to the pervasive allure yet the concomitant impossibility of sexual normativity defining the American family, a tension ever more evident as the rebellious 1960s passed into the 1970s—even for that paragon of innocence, *The Brady Bunch*, as the following chapter demonstrates.