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The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom

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Published by Rutgers University Press

Pugh, Tison.

The Queer Fantasies of the American Family Sitcom.

Rutgers University Press, 2018.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/57769.



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Allegory, Queer Authenticity, and Marketing Tween Sexuality in *Hannah Montana*



Any advertiser—or consumer of advertising—knows the hoary but time-tested adage of the field: sex sells. Sparking consumers’ erotic desires encourages them to open their wallets, but it would appear that preteen children, who may have only vague ideas about human sexuality, would prove the exception to this axiom. Most children’s television simply avoids the topic of sexuality altogether,¹ yet, within the subfield of tween sitcoms, many programs depict their protagonists taking initial steps in courtship: first dates and first kisses—but rarely first experiences with intercourse. Marketing tween programs also necessitates appealing to children’s parents, who may or may not watch these shows with their children yet who will determine whether family funds are spent on related merchandise.² As a subgenre of the family sitcom, tween sitcoms must negotiate between dual audiences of young viewers and their parents, as they must also negotiate the need to address their protagonists’ dating lives without tackling topics of teen sexuality too graphically, lest they prompt a parental backlash. Confronting the inherently queer fantasies of genre, family-friendly programming, and children’s innocence, these programs mask sexuality on their surface yet must inevitably confront the ways in which it seeps through into their story lines, even if only allegorically.

Among the many tween programs of the early twenty-first century, *Hannah Montana* (2006–11) achieved phenomenal popular success and a financial windfall for the corporations backing it: It's a Laugh Productions, Michael Poryes Productions, and Disney Channel Original Productions.³ This family sitcom stars Miley Cyrus in the role of Miley Stewart, a self-admittedly dorky teen living in all respects a normal life—except for her secret alter-identity as international pop-sensation Hannah Montana.⁴ Miley's family includes her father, Robby Ray (Billy Ray Cyrus), who also serves as her manager; her brother, Jackson (Jason Earles), with whom she shares an antagonistic yet affectionate relationship; and her deceased mother (Brooke Shields), who appears in several dream and fantasy sequences to guide her daughter's path. The series' first episodes depict Miley sharing her secret with friends Lilly Truscott (Emily Osment) and Oliver Oken (Mitchel Musso), who then assume the alter-identities of Lola Luftnagle and Mike Stanley III so that they may join Hannah on her glamorous escapades. Miley's misadventures begin in middle school, as she suffers the unwarranted antagonisms of mean girls Ashley and Amber, as well as her dating tribulations with a stream of cute beaux, including movie star Jake Ryan and brooding bad-boy rocker Jesse. Most episodes feature a subplot focusing on Jackson and his "frenemy" relationship with Rico (Moises Arias), his boss's son at the beachside stand where he works. The series ends as Miley and Lilly enroll at "Standford University"—having learned many valuable lessons about life, family, and friendship along the way. Featuring vivacious Miley Stewart as its lead character, *Hannah Montana* creates an appealing heroine who follows a long tradition of television's plucky teens. Bill Osgerby discerns the cultural popularity of a "teen girl TV tradition whose accent on freedom and fun *always* gestured towards a femininity that was independent and active," with Miley embodying this archetypal character.⁵

Hannah Montana evokes the presumed innocence of the tween sitcom genre on its surface level of narration, yet the program concomitantly allegorizes Cyrus's controversial transition into a sexual provocateur, thus preparing young viewers to accompany the protagonist/actor as she segues out of the show and into her career as a solo artist. The program asserts its interest in duality in its theme song "Best of Both Worlds," which explains the foundational premise that Miley Stewart doubles as superstar Hannah Montana. This celebrity duality extends to her friends, who accompany her in her jet-set lifestyle, and to her brother, who begins dating bikini model Siena in the series' later episodes, thereby proving the availability of sexually desirable romantic partners to everyday schlubs. The presumed innocence of tween sexuality establishes another level of duality within the program's marketing and narratology: through the core value of Cyrus's personal authenticity, *Hannah Montana* hides sexuality from parental view and depicts its protagonist as an age-appropriate role model, thus paradoxically marketing an absence of

sexuality that merges seamlessly into Cyrus's marketing of herself as a queer advocate and icon. In this light, Cyrus's post-*Hannah* declaration of her pansexuality encodes another queer meaning to her sitcom, encouraging an allegorical reading of Miley's "coming out" as Hannah Montana as equivalent to Cyrus's revelations of her adult erotic interests.⁶

Family Sitcoms and the Rise of the Tweens

Many popular family sitcoms of the legacy and broadcast networks in the 1990s and 2000s adhered to the time-tested strategy of depicting characters of various ages to appeal to audience members of various ages—a tendency evident in a bounteous array of the era's successful programs, including *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990–96), *Step by Step* (1991–98), *Home Improvement* (1991–99), *The Nanny* (1993–99), *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000–2006), *According to Jim* (2001–9), *Reba* (2001–7), *The Bernie Mac Show* (2001–6), *8 Simple Rules* (2002–5), *George Lopez* (2002–7), *Everybody Hates Chris* (2005–9), and *The Middle* (2009–). Many of these programs also loosely followed the dysfunctional model of the family sitcom as inaugurated by *Married with Children* (1987–97), *Roseanne* (1988–97), and *The Simpsons* (1989–), although this form had mellowed over the years. A tart domestic disharmony reigns in these programs' households, yet a sugar-coating of sentimentalism ensures viewers that, as much as these family members claim their distaste for one another, affection lies just below the surface, with *Malcolm in the Middle* exemplifying this trend. This program tells the story of a dysfunctional family from their genius son's point of view: "I want a better family!" Malcolm (Frankie Muniz) shouts in the series pilot, which features such comic grotesque moments as his mother giving his father a full-body shave. Yet even he realizes the centrality of his parents and siblings to his life: "See? That's what I'm talking about. This family may be rude, loud, and gross, and have no shame whatsoever . . . anyway, with them, you know where you stand. And when I have a problem, they're always there" ("Malcolm Babysits"). Mom Frankie of *The Middle* describes herself as "just a cranky, tired mom with nothing to lose" ("The Block Party"), but viewers readily understand that her voice-over conveys her true feelings for her family: "That's the thing about family. Oh, sure, they eat your food and wreck your face, you gotta save them a thousand times a day from God knows what, but every now and then, they save you" ("Pilot").

For the 2000s, then, familial dysfunction creates a slight ironic edge to domestic sitcoms yet so slight that both characters and viewers understand the primacy of the family unit. Also during this period, cable and premium channels were challenging the hegemony of the legacy networks, with many attracting their audiences through provocative programming, including family sitcoms verging on dramedies, pitched to niche demographics, such as *Weeds*

(2005–12), *United States of Tara* (2009–11), and *Nurse Jackie* (2009–15). Freed from the constraints of network standards, these programs embraced daring story lines, going where few network families could follow: in *Weeds*, financially strapped Nancy Botwin (Mary-Louise Parker) begins selling marijuana and ensnares her family in the murderous affairs of a Mexican drug cartel; in *United States of Tara*, Tara Gregson (Toni Collette) struggles with multiple-personality disorder and seeks to understand its roots in her traumatic childhood; and in *Nurse Jackie*, Jackie Peyton (Edie Falco) juggles her professional and domestic responsibilities while hiding her drug addiction.

Increasingly throughout this era, the subgenres of teen and tween sitcoms flooded the television screen, with their foundations reaching back to the late 1950s and early 1960s with *The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis* (1959–63), *Gidget* (1965–66), and *The Patty Duke Show* (1963–66). Tween innocence confronts adolescent sexuality in these programs, which generally alternate in treating these themes straightforwardly in some instances, euphemistically in others. *Blossom* (1990–95) dramatizes these tensions as its eponymous protagonist (Mayim Bialik) discusses her physical maturation with her father. “I’m a woman now,” she tells him, as he ironically invokes the familiar fantasy of the sexless child: “Couple years after you’re married, you’ll want to have sex for the first time. But hopefully by then I’ll be blind, deaf, and in a home in New Jersey” (“Blossom Blossoms”). The definitive tween romance of the 1990s belongs to Cory Matthews (Ben Savage) and Topanga Lawrence (Danielle Fishel) in *Boy Meets World* (1993–2000), yet Cory nervously hesitates during many moments of their burgeoning relationship. Cory’s teacher Mr. Feeny (William Daniels), attempting to inspire an appreciation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* in his students, waxes eloquently, “It’s about the all-consuming power of love, and the inevitability of its influence on each of our lives,” to which Cory replies in a panic: “Are you aware that I’m only eleven years old?” (“Pilot”). In these and many other such instances, sexual innocence defines the tween, with sexual angst defining his or her parents.

Against the 1990s backdrop of shifting audiences, multiplying channels, and new images of the American family, numerous films and television programs, especially those airing on the Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, were targeting specifically the female tween market. Many of these channels’ sitcoms tweak the basic formula of the family sitcom by casting young adolescents as their stars while maintaining siblings and parents in subsidiary roles. This subgenre of family sitcoms, disparagingly referred to as “zitcoms,” includes such titles as *Lizzie McGuire* (2001–4), *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody* (2005–8), *Zoey 101* (2005–8), *Wizards of Waverly Place* (2007–12), *iCarly* (2007–12), and *Big Time Rush* (2009–13). For the most part these programs handle teen sexuality gingerly, acknowledging burgeoning attractions but eschewing visual depictions beyond light kisses. A shared theme of this genre encourages teens to be

true to their authentic selves, and, for female characters, this story line portrays them breaking free from the bonds of traditional femininity. After beating a boy at arm wrestling, Lizzie McGuire learns from her gym coach, “There are people that think being strong is a boy thing, but that’s because they’re severely lacking in brains” (“One of the Guys”). While it is difficult to think of anything less authentic than a record label’s prepackaged boy band, the teens of *Big Time Rush* insist on their authenticity. When their studio wants to hire a “bad boy” for their group owing to this stock character’s demographic appeal, lead singer Kendall (Kendall Schmidt) insists, “We just don’t want anything fake about our band” (“Big Time Bad Boy”). Thematically teaching (pre)adolescents to believe in themselves, tween sitcoms position their youthful protagonists as role models guiding viewers to their unique truths.

The entertainment industry has long been governed by a masculinist bias in its offerings, yet studio executives began perceiving that girls—half of the youth population—constitute a powerful market in themselves, with tween sitcoms proving the power of this demographic. Jane Startz, the producer of such family-friendly sitcoms and films as *Charles in Charge* (1984–90) and *Ella Enchanted* (2004), outlines Hollywood’s previous reasoning and its realization of the depth of the female tween market: “The time I was growing up in this industry, the conventional wisdom was girls will watch something that has a boy [as the lead character], but the boys won’t watch something that has a girl. That may or may not be true. But I think what people are realizing is it really doesn’t matter that much if the boys are going to come or not because there is such a faithful following for some of these girl projects.”⁷ Within the cinematic world, Anne Hathaway found her path to stardom in a string of hit movies marketed to tween girls, including *The Princess Diaries* (2001), its sequel *The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement* (2004), and *Ella Enchanted*, as did Lindsay Lohan with *Freaky Friday* (2003), *Mean Girls* (2004), and *Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen* (2004). For many young female actors a Disney Channel or Nickelodeon tween vehicle initiates their path to stardom (and a singing career): Hilary Duff in *Lizzie McGuire*, Raven-Symoné in *That’s So Raven* (2003–7), Selena Gomez in *Wizards of Waverly Place*, Miranda Cosgrove in *iCarly*, and Demi Lovato in *Sunny with a Chance* (2009–11). As Belinda Luscombe explains of the rise of Gomez, Lovato, and Cyrus, “Each of these youngsters was given a TV show—the so-called zitcom—followed usually by a recording contract with Disney-owned Hollywood Records, songs in heavy rotation on Radio Disney and on Disney-movie sound tracks, a concert tour with Disney-owned Buena Vista Concerts and tie-in merchandise throughout the Disney stores. Miley & Co. are like modern Mouseketeers, but instead of M-I-C-K-E-Y, they spell C-A-S-H.”⁸

As the above programs illustrate, tween sitcoms stand as a recognizable subset of family sitcoms, with young actors in their starring roles and young viewers solicited as their foremost audience, yet they stake their further appeal to other family members, including siblings of both sexes and parents. For marketing purposes, while many tweens spend significant amounts of cash, their parents must be pitched to as well because they control the family's purse strings; thus arises the utility of casting tween programs under the overarching framework of a family sitcom. *Hannah Montana* emphasizes this narrative imperative in a moment of metadramatic staging, when Jackson and Rico sing of their boyish preference for a narrative "a little bit more gory" before conceding that their desires will not be met because "they said we had to tell a family story" ("He Could Be the One").⁹ This "they"—presumably the show's producers and Disney executives—insists on the family nature of the program, for the tween herself can stand in as the primary, but not the sole, point of focalization.

To this end, *Hannah Montana* creates an appealing, bubbly, and wholesome vision of American family life. Although Miley and Jackson squabble frequently, their affection for each other is never in doubt, and in a show based on a celebrity fantasy, this bickering captures a realistic and humorous aspect of sibling rivalry. One memorable such scene occurs when Jackson mocks Miley's hair extensions, and they subsequently mimic each other by repeating "hair extensions, hair extensions"; Robby Ray, driving and driven to distraction, mutters to himself "Almost home, almost home" ("I Am Mamaw, Hear Me Roar!"). Parents, it would seem, should be able to relate to such moments, as they would also likely enjoy decoding the program's numerous references to sitcoms past, particularly those from their childhoods.¹⁰ In further framing its appeal to various family members, *Hannah Montana* serves up frequent doses of light scatological humor appealing to young children yet not so vulgar as to alienate parents. Robby Ray's ode to toilet training—"I like to sing, I like to dance, but I can't do it with poopy in my pants"—is unlikely to offend ("Lilly, Do You Want to Know a Secret?"). When Jackson, Hannah, and Lilly eat prune butter and then flee to the bathroom for immediate release, the scatology is implied rather than depicted ("Lilly's Mom Has Got It Goin' On"). Summing up *Hannah Montana's* appeal, Jason Earles declares, "I think the thing that we're most proud of is the fact that we came up with a show that the whole family will sit there and watch together. I think it's really gonna end up being the show for this generation" ("From Auditions to Wrap: The Cast Looks Back," *Hannah Montana: The Final Season*). Thus, despite *Hannah Montana's* primary orientation to a female tween audience, its solicitation of parental and sibling viewers results in a program that these family members, while perhaps not their first choice, are likely to watch along with their

sisters and daughters. And once viewers begin watching the show, its marketing efforts that rely both on the program's surface treatment of children's innocence and on its occluded treatment of sexuality can begin in earnest, demonstrating further the elasticity of the queer fantasies on which family sitcoms rely.

Marketing *Hannah Montana* to Tweens: Queer Authenticity and Merchandising

The entertainment and advertising industries see tweens as a lucrative fan base, as evident in the title of David Siegel, Timothy Coffey, and Gregory Livingston's marketing guide to this demographic: *The Great Tween Buying Machine*. Tweens form a somewhat indeterminate amalgamation for marketing purposes, with the term shifting for the particular advertising objective of a given project. After reviewing potential age demarcations for tweens, whether from seven to fourteen, eight to twelve, or ten to sixteen, Siegel, Coffey, and Livingston define the group in terms of its purchasing power: "all of these definitions are right if the basis for choosing them is to identify a sizable, definable market that represents an opportunity for the marketer's business."¹¹ Tween culture is adaptive and reactive, as Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh argue, noting that it "seems to be moving progressively downward in age to touch upon even the lower age limits of girlhood and expanding outward to include boys."¹² The maxim that children "are growing older younger" captures the controversial nature of tween marketing, in the fear that children are barraged with consumerist messages that they do not yet have the mental or emotional capacity to digest. Notwithstanding these valid concerns, it is also worth remembering that tweens are not sheep. Dan Freeman and Stewart Shapiro characterize this demographic as "skeptical beyond their years" and warn marketers that "as tweens become more skeptical of the truthfulness of promotional messages, they are more likely to avoid the message or transfer their dislike of the message onto the brand."¹³ Also, the consumerist trend of children's increased buying power comes with the corollary of infantilizing the adult market, and Benjamin Barber documents marketers' efforts to "induc[e] puerility in adults and preserv[e] what is childish in children trying to grow up, even as children are 'empowered' to consume."¹⁴

Various cultural commentators, expressing concern for the child viewers involved, have decried the fact that television is a commercial enterprise, particularly in regard to the reputedly family-friendly cable channels. Ruthann Mayes-Elma, on reading Disney's 2008 Annual Report, is dismayed that it "discusses kids, from birth to teenagers, as mere consumers—there is no indication of interest in the health and well-being of Disney constituents," as she then compares the corporation to a pimp: "In the case of *Hannah Montana*,

Disney is selling a sixteen-year-old girl, a form of pop cultural prostitution.”¹⁵ With more restrained terms, Tyler Bickford notes the “unapologetically commercial entertainment” offered “from large corporations such as Disney”—hinting that corporations should indeed apologize for creating commercial entertainment.¹⁶ It is tempting to compare cultural critics disparaging the commercial nature of the entertainment industry to Renault in *Casablanca* (“I am shocked—shocked!—to find that gambling is going on in here!”) because, for the most part, television’s commercialism does not warrant moralizing as much as analysis for the constraints it places on artistic creation and for its framing of cultural ideologies. The profit motive is a precondition of the medium, one that enables the free dissemination of programs through the airwaves on network television, thus providing entertainment to the masses at no cost beyond the purchase of a television set, and with consumers opting to pay more for the bounties of cable channels.¹⁷

Precisely because of its commercialism and its hybrid status as a jointly financial and artistic endeavor, television has long been derided as an inferior art form, and throughout its history it has frequently interwoven marketing into its narratives—demonstrating clearly that *Hannah Montana* is no outlier in this regard. From the early days of television, *The George Burns and Gracie Allen Show* (1950–58) incorporated Carnation evaporated milk into its plotlines. Gracie advises her friend Blanche, “Always use Carnation evaporated milk in your coffee. Men love it,” and the program’s announcer, Bill Goodwin, demonstrates to George and Gracie’s houseguest that “the best shortcake is made with Carnation evaporated milk” (“Episode 1”). In the first episode of *Hazel* (1961–66) shot in color, Hazel and the Baxters buy color televisions, in an unobvious hint to viewers to upgrade their sets (“What’ll We Watch Tonight”). The theme song of *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–71) originally included lyrics dedicated to its sponsor Winston cigarettes (“Winston tastes good like a cigarette should,” in “Getting Settled”). Various family sitcoms have increased their profits through merchandising tie-ins: *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–63) lunchboxes, *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–70) board games, even *Happy Days* (1974–84) slot machines. Sometimes objects in a program—such as Buffy’s Mrs. Beasley doll from *Family Affair* (1966–71)—spark a lucrative fad. *Hannah Montana* adheres to and amplifies the standard protocols of television marketing, offering an array of products inspired by the show—from clothes to alarm clocks, school supplies to jewelry—as it also markets a celebrity lifestyle that both avows and disavows consumerist consumption. Through this duality—Miley as a nonconsumerist consumer—*Hannah Montana* acknowledges criticisms of tween marketing while proceeding apace with its presentation of Cyrus and Hannah as authentic role models for young viewers.

A guiding trope of contemporary celebrity is founded on the presumption of a star’s authenticity and, as a corollary to this authenticity, her relatability.

As Jo Littler proposes, stars such as Jennifer Lopez proclaim their authenticity by rewriting the Cinderella myth, in which they revel in glamour while highlighting their impoverished roots: “Instead of merely luxuriating in her palatial excess, Cinderella now has to show that she can still remember that she started out in the kitchen. This knowledge or awareness structures her character; it stops her ‘getting above herself,’ it keeps her ‘real.’”¹⁸ Such stars appear to be not just rich and famous (and thus distanced from their fans) but also grounded and authentic; they consequently remain relatable to their audiences, despite vast disparities in income and lifestyle. For *Hannah Montana* the tween viewer should be able to identify equally with Miley Cyrus, Miley Stewart, and Hannah Montana, with the actor and her character’s dual identity facilitating this process. Melanie Kennedy outlines how *Hannah Montana* modulates between celebrity and tween culture, fusing a hybrid reality cognizant of the myriad and contradictory ideologies related to tweendom: “*Hannah Montana*, and the broader tween media landscape, should be understood as products of the contemporary postfeminist, neoliberal, pop-cultural moment, highly invested in celebrity as well as the attendant discourses of the self, the real, and the authentic.”¹⁹ Authenticity is key to the narrative adventures of *Hannah Montana* in creating an appealing character for tween viewers, one who strives to maintain her genuine, grounded self as she juggles her everyday and superstar lives, as it is also key to marketing related merchandise to the demographic she represents.

To enhance their appeal, family sitcoms have long exploited the thin line between their stars and their protagonists. With such characters as Lucille Ball’s Lucy Ricardo, Andy Griffith’s Andy Taylor, Bill Cosby’s Heathcliff Huxtable, and Roseanne Barr’s Roseanne Conner, the actors collapse the distance between themselves and their roles, thus appearing as authentic and relatable people rather than as celebrities. Will Smith in *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* and George Lopez in *George Lopez* share their real-life names with their characters—merging actor with role to the point that they are virtually indistinguishable. In a similar manner, *Hannah Montana* blurs the distinction between fiction and reality in numerous ways, most obviously in the razor-thin line between star Miley Cyrus and protagonist Miley Stewart, with both actor and character hailing from Tennessee and achieving international acclaim as a pop star. Cyrus’s father, Billy Ray, a country singer best known for his hit single “Achy Breaky Heart,” plays Miley’s father, with this character similarly experiencing a successful singing career in his past and now writing songs for his daughter. Even Miley’s horse correlates with Cyrus’s childhood pet—a connection acknowledged in an episode’s dedication to “Roam-Man (1988–2009)” (“Love That Lets Go”). The marketing of Miley/Cyrus/Hannah consistently obfuscates the borders between them, such as in the “Back Home Again with Miley” minidocumentary, which follows Cyrus and her father on a

journey to their Tennessee residence. A caption reads, “Even though it’s across the country from their Hollywood home, this farm is the heart of the Cyrus family,” and Miley’s return to Tennessee provides the plot for *Hannah Montana: The Movie*.

Further enhancing the fictional authenticity of *Hannah Montana*, many guest stars play thinly disguised versions of themselves or simply themselves. In a recurring role, country superstar Dolly Parton plays Aunt Dolly, a famous singer, and Vicki Lawrence riffs on her character Thelma Harper (from *The Carol Burnett Show* [1967–78] and *Mama’s Family* [1983–90]), appearing as Miley’s Mamaw. When Angus T. Jones of *Two and a Half Men* (2003–15) guest-stars as the Stewarts’ new neighbor, his character’s name is T. J.—taken from his initials (“Sweet Home Hannah Montana”). Celebrities who play themselves include the Jonas Brothers (“Me and Mr. Jonas and Mr. Jonas and Mr. Jonas”), Sheryl Crow (“It’s the End of the Jake as We Know It”), David Archuleta (“Promma Mia”), and Ray Romano (“We’re All on This Date Together”). When Miley confesses her true identity to the world, she does so to Jay Leno, host of *The Tonight Show* (“I’ll Always Remember You”), and she follows this revelation with interviews with Robin Roberts, cohost of *Good Morning America* (“Can You See the Real Me?”), and Kelly Ripa of *Live! with Regis and Kelly* (“I Am Mamaw, Hear Me Roar!”). Cyrus asserts of the overlap between herself and her character: “Most people know me as Hannah Montana, but Hannah is a television character. She’s fiction. Sure, I’ve put a lot of myself in her. I’ve tried to make her come to life. But that doesn’t make her real, and it doesn’t make her *me*” (*MG* 5–6).²⁰ This duality between Miley’s and Cyrus’s lives is key to the marketing endeavors behind *Hannah Montana*, for it builds levels of discourse and metadiscourse that both obfuscate and escalate the program’s treatment of sexuality. In the ensuing play between virginal innocence and sexual maturation, the character and the celebrity are both rendered relationally “authentic” while denuding this authenticity of its purported value.

Certainly, the executives, marketers, and writers of *Hannah Montana* consistently foreground Miley’s need to maintain her authenticity, as they concomitantly trumpet her relatability to the program’s tween viewers. As the program’s sell sheet declares, “It is about everyday girls with secret, superstar lives both real and imagined. . . . All girls can relate to girl next door Miley Stewart, but they want to be like her alter ego, Hannah Montana.”²¹ Rich Ross, the Disney executive who greenlit *Hannah Montana*, agrees: “It’s not just that she’s a rock star; . . . it’s that she’s relatable, too. She’s someone you want to be friends with. And she’s working to balance what she has in her intense life.”²² Miley’s authenticity and relatability deepen her appeal for parental viewers as well, as the *New York Post* proposes: “Her young fans relate to episodes about crushing on a boy at school, fighting with a sibling, or sneaking out to a movie

with friends, only to get caught and grounded. Yet the subtext—lessons on friendship, loyalty, and respect—pleases parents as well, making Cyrus an utterly safe and ultrapopular choice for both generations.”²³ Relatable to her teen viewers while demonstrating her appropriate values to adults, Miley models an authenticity attractive to disparate strands of her audience yet one that must ultimately collapse beneath its inherent paradox and reveal the queer fissures in her character.

For Cyrus/Miley to assert herself as a moral authority, she must remain true to her authentic self, a theme introduced in the series’ first episode through the lyrics of “This Is the Life,” in which she sings “I’m going to take my time, I’m still getting it right.” Given this credo, Miley’s mistakes become the means for viewers to learn alongside her, and her authenticity is evident in the fact that she is disarmingly candid with friends and family, often blurting out a version of her “say what” catchphrase when another character states something unexpected.²⁴ Also key to the character’s relatability and authenticity is her outsider status in her everyday life as Miley Stewart. The program frequently stresses Miley’s southern roots, establishing a red state / blue state dichotomy that she bridges effortlessly: southern in her upbringing and values (“I can’t. I’m from Tennessee. We don’t do that,” Miley pleads to Lilly), yet Californian in her celebrity subculture (“Well, you’re in California now, and we do do that,” Lilly replies [“I Can’t Make You Love Hannah If You Don’t”]). Her authenticity is further encoded in her relationships with her peers, as she teaches her boyfriend, Jake, an actor who revels in the perks of his celebrity, “Being normal is not stupid. It lets me have real friends, and it reminds me that I’m just like everybody else” (“Achy Jakey Heart, Part 2”). To stress Miley’s credibility as an average teen, she and Lilly are victims of school mean girls Ashley and Amber, with the former mocking her, “Could you be any more of a hillbilly?” (“Ooh, Ooh Itchy Woman”). They also place her and Lilly, along with recurring character Dandruff Danny, last on their “cool list” (“The Idol Side of Me”). School bully Henrietta Laverne, more menacingly known as “the Cracker,” targets Miley for torment (“Schooly Bully”). As in fiction, so in life, and Cyrus recalls in her autobiography her sixth-grade struggles with friends and foes, thereby establishing her relatability to her tween audience in their joint struggles for acceptance among classmates: “The cool people find each other. The smart people find each other. Me and all the other in-between artsy people realize we’d better join forces and make the best of it” (*MG* 13).

Ironically, even Hannah’s and Cyrus’s assumptions of their diva personas deepen their core authenticity and thus foreshadow its queer fissures. This evolution occurs in *Hannah Montana: The Movie*, in which Robby Ray takes Miley to Tennessee to “detox” her from her Hollywood airs, after she fights with supermodel Tyra Banks over a pair of shoes and ruins Lilly’s sweet-sixteen birthday by arriving as Hannah—and consequently causing a media

hullabaloo—rather than as Miley. As her grandmother (Margo Martindale) tells Miley after she sulkily arrives in Tennessee, “Look, missy. You may be Hannah Montana back home, but here we’re britches and boots. And if that ain’t good enough for you, maybe you should just pack up and git.” With life again conscripted to imitate art, Cyrus mentions in her autobiography that at one point she “was being a brat. Stardom had changed me. I wasn’t Miley anymore. I was Hollywood. Something *had* to shift” (*MG* 172). Hollywood transforms Miley and Cyrus into glamorous narcissists, yet both the character and the actor, reminded of their core values, shift back to their authentic selves—all the while maintaining their Hollywood lifestyles of celebrity excess.

Miley’s authenticity is directly tied to *Hannah Montana*’s merchandising, which is not solely a lucrative revenue stream but key to the program itself, as it dramatizes Hannah’s appeal both as a likable character and as a successful marketing icon. With disarming candor, Cyrus writes in her autobiography, “The show had proven so successful that Hannah Montana had gone from being a character to being a brand” (*MG* 164). Carissa Rosenberg, *Seventeen* magazine’s entertainment director, echoes this sentiment yet switches the actor for the character: “Miley Cyrus herself is a brand, not just Hannah Montana.”²⁵ The program’s theme song, “Best of Both Worlds,” begins as an ode to celebrity culture and shopping: “You got the limo out front, / Hottest styles, every shoe, every color.” Developing this consumerist motif, *Hannah Montana* stages numerous scenes emphasizing Hannah’s appeal in marketing products. As her publicist, Vita (Vanessa Williams), tells her: “Do you know what a well-placed photo of you shopping is worth? You’re a star, an icon. You look at it, touch it, wear it, and the whole world has to have it” (*Hannah Montana: The Movie*). The Disney Channel positions Hannah Montana as the ultimate endorsement available through its crossover marketing of multiple programs. In *That’s So Suite Life of Hannah Montana* the characters of *That’s So Raven*, *The Suite Life of Zack and Cody*, and *Hannah Montana* encounter one another, with Hannah endorsing Raven’s fashion designs: “Well, I want a Raven original.” Raven then exults that “London Tipton and Hannah Montana are having a catfight over my dress,” knowing that Hannah’s endorsement will increase her viability as a designer, as the scene also enhances the desirability of products marketed to *Hannah Montana*’s viewers.

Several episodes of *Hannah Montana* portray young fans eagerly purchasing merchandise endorsed by their icon, such as the young girl who buys a scarf that Hannah promotes while standing underneath a mannequin of herself (“It’s a Mannequin’s World”). Lilly reads Hannah’s email aloud to her, which includes a fan’s determination to emulate her pop idol: “Dear Hannah, I love, love, love that scarf you wore at the video awards. Where, where, where can I get one?” (“Oops! I Meddled Again”). The show refrains from providing the answer—Walmart—yet this bifurcation of worlds—down-home simplicity

and celebrity glamour—extends to Cyrus’s description of the fashions in her two closets: “Both are stuffed with more clothes than I could wear in a year. Half of the stuff is clothes I bought at Forever 21 and Walmart, and half is gifts from designers like Chanel, Gucci, and Prada that I began to get as the show took off” (*MG* 112). While few celebrities would admit to hanging Walmart fashions in their wardrobes, this corporation sells the Hannah Montana line of clothing, with Cyrus describing its creation: “We look at what I wear, and then we try to make it for \$16.”²⁶ Beyond the merchandise marketing in the program, many *Hannah Montana* products promote other such products, such as the *Hannah Montana in the Mix* Book and Magnetic Set. The booklet first admonishes, “Every girl should have her own personal style,” and then encourages young readers simply to emulate Hannah: “Take this quiz and find out which Hannah Montana style is right for you!”²⁷ In the series, Hannah endorses the skin cream Magic Glow, which further enhances her credibility as a pitchperson: the episode dramatizes her embarrassment over a pimple caught in the advertising photograph, which accentuates her relatability to her tween viewers through their shared problems (“You’re So Vain, You Probably Think This Zit Is about You”). In marketing terms such scenes create the series’ and Cyrus’s “brandscape,” which Nicholas Carah defines as “an experiential social space where marketers engage consumers in the co-creation of brand meaning.”²⁸

Yet at the same time that Hannah is depicted as part of the marketing industry behind her success, the authenticity that is core to the Miley/Hannah dyad often emerges to trouble her image as a celebrity pitchperson—and, consequently, to strengthen it. For example, the sitcom mocks the Hollywood publicity machine when Hannah and her love interest, Jake, are hosting the Teen Scene Awards, and Hannah errs by reading from the teleprompter both the scripted dialogue and the stage directions she should omit. Jake delivers his lines correctly, but she follows with, “Oh, Jake, I bet you say that to all your co-stars. Push Jake. I mean . . .” as she belatedly pushes him. Too authentic to understand the scripted banter she should perform, Hannah repeats her error when she reads aloud “Hold for laughter” (“People Who Use People”). The episode “Smells Like Teen Sellout” extends Hannah’s credibility to the commercial realm, with its title alerting young fans to the possibility that their icon could exploit her celebrity by endorsing products that she does not use. While shooting a commercial for “Eau Wow” perfume, Hannah discovers, to her dismay, that it smells like raspberries, as she then recalls winning a raspberry-pie-eating contest and vomiting on the governor of Tennessee. Colin Lassiter, a recurring character in the role of a Larry King–style interviewer, declares, “I’m glad you’re not one of those celebrities who goes out and pushes something she doesn’t believe in.” Hannah realizes she cannot sabotage her integrity by endorsing Eau Wow, even though the company gave her a car in appreciation of

her marketing appeal; she tells Robby Ray, “The truth is always the best thing. Even though sometimes it hurts.” Within the standard narratology of a family sitcom, such moralizing indicates that the protagonist has learned a valuable lesson, with viewers at home learning one as well: that Hannah Montana—and Miley Cyrus—are trusted voices within the commercial milieu.

Along with establishing Hannah’s credibility as a pitchperson, *Hannah Montana* depicts Miley decrying the consumerism that her alter ego endorses. This aspect of her character, while surprising given the sitcom’s investment in commercialism, cements Cyrus’s ethos for her fans because, as Catherine Driscoll explains, the tension between consumer conformity and resistance to consumer conformity are deeply intertwined in tween culture: “The girl market has always utilized nonconformity and, in particular, relations between conformity and nonconformity. But the opposition between pleasure in consumption figured as conformity and pleasure against the grain of such conformity does not provide a useful model for considering girl culture, where resistance is often just another form of conformity and conformity may be compatible with other resistances.”²⁹ In an episode illustrating her slavish devotion but then resistance to consumerism, Miley goes to outlandish lengths to purchase a new cellphone, which involves a harebrained scheme to sell photographs of actor Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, dressed in drag, to a sleazy tabloid. When her plan unravels, she confesses to Johnson, “I guess I just got so caught up in having the next new thing.” He patiently explains, “You know, Miley, there’s always going to be something new coming around the corner.” Lilly chimes in as well, realizing that she has heard Johnson’s lesson before: “Hey, that’s what my mom says” (“Don’t Stop ’til You Get the Phone”). Having learned her lesson about rampant consumerism, Miley now stands as a stronger moral authority. She will not endorse products she does not believe in, and she recognizes the dangers of untamed consumerism, with the implicit message that when Hannah/Cyrus endorses a product, it meets her standards of excellence and necessity.

In contrast to the fantasy world of Hannah Montana’s glamorous success, Miley Stewart’s everyday life affords her only a modest allowance that leaves her with little disposable income—again enhancing her relatability to her fans—until Robby Ray dispenses \$5,000 of her fortune into a checking account. After this windfall, Miley initially resists consumerism, telling Lilly while shopping: “You want to know something else? It feels good not to buy anything. To no longer be one of those weak spineless consumers that these malls prey on.” Yet the plot twists when she spies a product she desires: “But it’s Pearls by Henri. The finest makeup in the world.” The episode’s physical comedy involves Miley tripping into a display clamshell filled with makeup, but the episode’s moral resignifies her economic follies into a lesson in believing in oneself. As Robby Ray explains, “The only reason that you couldn’t handle

this money is because you didn't trust yourself as much as I trust you." He then adds: "The problem is, you have to remember that sometime it's OK to say yes. Unless you're talking about boys, then the answer is always no" ("You Never Give Me Money"). With these nuggets of paternal wisdom, Robby Ray advocates self-validation through consumerism while discouraging sexuality, thus encouraging viewers at home to promote adolescent chastity through adolescent consumerism. Consumerism takes precedence over sexual maturation in a girl's evolution into womanhood, as Miley muses in voice-over: "My very first credit card. Today, I am a woman." In a sitcom trope famous from *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), with Carrie Bradshaw's penchant for Jimmy Choo, Manolo Blahnik, and other high-end designer shoes, Miley likewise chirps, "I have to have these shoes"—although she finds hers at a flea market ("Debt It Be"). Buying shoes announces a girl's womanhood in the world of *Hannah Montana*, yet the intersection of adolescence and sexuality complicates efforts to market Cyrus as a superstar to the tween masses, many of whose parents frowned on the young woman's metamorphosis into a sexual provocateur, with her relatability and moral authority thus assuming ever queerer aspects.

Marketing the Queer Tween in *Hannah Montana*

Many parents and child-rearing authorities worry that children will find television's candid depictions of sexuality confusing and upsetting and so seek out "family-friendly programming"—that emptiest of television signifiers—to shield their children from sexually mature themes. Diane Levin cautions that "today's children are bombarded with large doses of graphic sexual content that they cannot process and that are often frightening. While children struggle to make sense of mature sexual content, they are robbed of valuable time for age-appropriate developmental tasks."³⁰ On its surface, *Hannah Montana* shies away from candid depictions of eroticism, with its most blatant references to sexuality appearing in episode titles alluding to more risqué pop-music fare: "She's a Super Sneak" points to Rick James's "Super Freak," "Oops! I Meddled Again" to Britney Spears's "Oops! . . . I Did It Again," "Lilly's Mom Has Got It Goin' On" to Fountains of Wayne's ode to attractive mothers, "Stacy's Mom," among many others. Even double entendres are rare within the overarching innocence of *Hannah Montana*. When Jackson falls while filming his outdoor adventuring, he tells Oliver that he "landed right on the coconuts"—with a pun on testicles stressed by the "nuts" he holds in his hands ("Smells Like Teen Sellout"). In a pique, Miley snaps at Lilly, "You're in love with Orlando Bloom, and he doesn't even know you exist," with Lilly countering, "Yet. But he will. And then you will watch the Lilly bloom" ("The Test of My Love"). Lilly's suggestive words hint at an erotic flowering, but its tame timbre masks sexuality more than uncovers it.

Within *Hannah Montana's* tween world, girls' interests are divided between shopping and boys, with these twin desires dramatized when Lilly suggests that "the mall has cute clothes," but Miley replies that "the beach has cute boys"—and in this instance, the beach wins ("It's My Party and I'll Lie If I Want To"). Many similar story lines dramatize Miley's crushes and dating relationships with boys, yet these hints of adolescent sexuality rarely disrupt the series' vigilant innocence. Even though much of the series is set on the strip of Malibu beach outside the Stewarts' home, the female characters are modestly attired, and the male characters keep their shirts on. The program acknowledges girls' desires to see boys shirtless, such as when Miley points out that Lilly can watch Orlando Bloom movies for some scopophilic pleasure, and she sighs over her idol's attractiveness, "And in the shirtless scenes, slo-mo" ("The Test of My Love"). Hoping to catch a glimpse of Jake's chest as he changes into swimwear, Lilly groans, "Oh, man, I missed his muscles. His zombie-slaying muscles" ("More Than a Zombie to Me"). At the same time, the program cannot entirely overlook the actors' maturing bodies, which are recognized through light jokes. Miley calls Jackson "Captain Hormone" when he daydreams of pillow fights with the daughter of Robby Ray's date ("She's a Super Sneak"), and Oliver complains, after Miley roughhouses with him for accidentally giving Jake the video camera containing her confession of love, "You ripped out my only chest hair" ("Good Golly, Miss Dolly").

When the possibility of light eroticism for these adolescent characters becomes too real, *Hannah Montana* often slips into fantasy, such as when Miley kisses a cookie jar while thinking of Jesse ("He Could Be the One"; fig. 5.1) or when Jackson declares, "Prepare to be kissed, as you've never been kissed before"—with the camera revealing that he is addressing Miley's toy pig ("California Screamin'"; fig. 5.2). Even within Hannah's wider celebrity culture, the "Teen Scene Award for Best Kiss" goes to "Frankie Muniz and his pillow in *The Lonely Sophomore*" ("People Who Use People"). This joke satirizes the MTV Movie Award for Best Kiss, with this category repeatedly won during the years of *Hannah Montana's* production by Kristen Stewart and Robert Pattinson for the *Twilight* series (2009–12). Here even *Twilight's* PG-13 sexuality is scrubbed away in the vision of young Muniz necking—or, one assumes, practicing necking—with a pillow.

Cookie jars, stuffed animals, and pillows aside, *Hannah Montana* must confront the likelihood of teens kissing, yet it does so gently, and camera cuts and other evasive editing techniques consistently delay depicting Miley's sexual maturation. Hannah thinks that she will kiss her crush, Jake, as they shoot a film in which she plays Zaronda, Princess of the Undead, and he a zombie slayer, with Jake advising her how to stage their embrace: "Just close your eyes, and count to sixty. It'll be over before you know it." Intimidated by the possibility of a kiss lasting so long, Hannah replies in shock, "Sixty?"



FIGURES 5.1 AND 5.2 Hannah kisses a cookie jar, and Jackson flirts with a stuffed animal, displaying the series' predilection for obfuscating depictions of teen sexuality.

Even this staged embrace is never seen, for the director stops filming at the moment before their lips meet (“More Than a Zombie to Me”). This strategy is repeated in the episode “Good Golly, Miss Dolly”: as Miley fantasizes about a kiss with Jake, the camera cuts away when their lips almost touch.

Robby Ray assumes the role of the father hopeful his daughter will never mature into teen—or even adult—sexuality. When she moons over her cute classmate Johnny Collins (Corbin Bleu), Robby Ray reminds her of her recent interests, “Honey, at your age, there’s only two things that are cute—squirrels and little puppy dogs” (“Lilly, Do You Want to Know a Secret?”), and he sighs to Jackson: “You realize how much easier life was when she believed boys still had cooties?” (“I Can’t Make You Love Hannah If You Don’t”). As Miley’s dating life blossoms, he frequently shatters the mood for romance. On one occasion, Hannah apologizes to Jake because they were forced to leave a movie early because of a mob of fans. Jake readily forgives her because, as he suggestively leans in for a kiss, “it gives us more time to . . .”; Robby Ray interrupts to offer lemonade, as Jake continues his sentence in an unexpected direction: “say hi to your dad!” Robby Ray genially warns his daughter’s suitor away: “Yes, sir. Sweet lemonade. Refreshing and as close to puckering as anybody’s gonna get around here.” In addition to evacuating these hints of teen eroticism, and throughout her on-again-off-again romances, Miley realizes the primacy of familial bonds over romantic attractions, concluding that her father’s love is more enduring: “At least I know one big handsome guy who will always love me” (“Achy Jakey Heart, Part 2”).

In a similar vein, as much as Robby Ray wards off her suitors’ affections, Miley strategizes against competitors who threaten the primacy of the father/daughter bond. Fearing that any parental eroticism would subvert the sanctity of the family unit, she sabotages Robby Ray’s dating life as she also demands, “Explain how you could ever think there’s someone out there who could ever replace my mom” (“She’s a Super Sneak”). In “Me and Mr. Jonas and Mr. Jonas and Mr. Jonas,” with this episode’s title riffing on Billy Paul’s soulful tribute to adulterous love “Me and Mrs. Jones,” Miley, jealous of the Jonas Brothers’ collaboration with Robby Ray, disparages them as “Stupid, cute Jonas Brothers”—with her words revealing both her envy of them and her attraction to them. More so, as Miley explains to Lilly, the possibility of homosocial bonding between her father and these young men undermines her preeminent status in Robby Ray’s world, particularly in the professional venue of music recording: “I’m sorry, but they’re guys, and he’s a guy, and what if he figures out that he likes writing for guys more than he likes writing for Hannah?” She laments, “He’s having a Jo-bro-mance.” The episode ends with the family reunited, as Robby Ray gently admonishes Miley, “You can’t seriously be jealous of me spending time with the Jonas Brothers.” Such jealousy borders on the ridiculous, even within the humorous and child-friendly story lines

of a tween sitcom, yet it reinforces the primacy of the family against outside intrusions—whether adolescent amorousness, professional obligations, or the homosocial pleasure of a “Jo-bro-mance.”

Developing these profamily themes and their antierotic undertones, Miley learns that parents should take precedence over their children’s dating and light erotic pleasures. Enjoying a picnic with Jesse after repeatedly canceling plans with Robby Ray, Miley finds herself tormented by her conscience, which speaks in his voice. “Get out of my head, old man!” she snaps, as she then clarifies to Jesse: “I’m with you.” The inner/outer dialogue continues with Robby Ray’s voice complaining, “And not me,” as she then says to Jesse: “On this beautiful day, having a lovely picnic.” Concentrating on Jesse, who leans in for a kiss, Miley appears to have vanquished her father’s claims for attention in favor of romance, yet Jesse’s father interrupts their burgeoning romance by calling on his cell phone. Miley expects Jesse to dismiss his father quickly, as she has done repeatedly to Robby Ray, but Jesse greets his father warmly, “Hey. No, now’s a great time.” She attempts to redirect his attention to her—“Hello! Losing the hoo-ah over here”—but he responds, “I’m sorry. It’s kind of important” (“Been Here All Along”). After learning that Jesse’s father serves in the military and is stationed in Afghanistan, Hannah gives a tribute concert for the families of armed forces members, thus again transforming the insistently chaste pleasures of teen dating into a celebration of the family unit.

The camera’s cutting away from teen amorousness eventually becomes little more than a joke in the series, with filming strategies hinting at deeper passions than those depicted onscreen. *Hannah Montana: The Movie* features Miley kissing Travis Brody (Lucas Till), but instead of a cut, the camera pans away slowly, thus implying that their kiss continues longer than viewers are allowed to see. In *Hannah Montana*’s final episode, as Lilly and Oliver declare their love for each other at the airport, some fellow travelers park their luggage in front of them—shielding young viewers from their kiss yet implying a long and heartfelt embrace after the bags are finally moved. This setup is repeated with the same travelers and the same luggage when Miley and Jesse kiss goodbye, as Miley virtually breaks into metadiscourse by telling these travelers, “Excuse me. Take your time”—thus letting viewers know that the kiss they cannot see is more passionate than standard tween television fare (“Wherever I Go”; fig. 5.3). Eroticism is absent yet present, maintaining Miley’s innocence at the same moment it can no longer narratively hold.

Given *Hannah Montana*’s hesitation to depict teen sexuality beyond brief kisses, parents of tween viewers know they need not be concerned about escalating depictions of eroticism. Even the slightest possibility that Miley/Hannah could lose her virginity—which, of course, would never be allowed to happen—is rendered impossible by the many layers of surveillance to which she is subjected. The paparazzi hound her to the extent that she must pretend



FIGURE 5.3 Luggage conveniently obfuscates teen passion—even in *Hannah Montana*'s final episode (“Wherever I Go”).

to date her brother (“My Boyfriend’s Jackson and There’s Gonna Be Trouble”), and her bodyguard Roxy repeatedly drops her catchphrase, “I got my eyes on you,” with her zealous prosecution of her duties necessitating that she impersonate a middle-school student to protect Miley throughout the day (“Schooly Bully”). One of the many security personnel who guards Hannah says, “It’s my job to keep that southern belle from getting dinged” (“Double Crossed,” of *Wizards on Deck with Hannah Montana*)—with the double entendre of “getting dinged” suggestive of the intercourse that cannot occur within the program’s fictions. Thus, within Miley/Hannah’s world, little attention is paid to issues of teen sexuality such as unplanned pregnancies. Miley approaches the school nurse, Lori (Christine Taylor), saying, “I need to talk to you about something a little awkward and potentially embarrassing,” and Lori’s comforting reply stresses her awareness of teens’ problems: “Miley, relax. I’m a nurse. I’ve seen it all.” While “seen it all” might imply pregnancy, venereal disease, and drug addiction, Lori snaps on a rubber glove to examine Miley’s head for lice (“California Screamin’”). Within the construction of her celebrity persona that complements her screen character, Cyrus affirms her commitment to maintaining her virginity: “When I got old enough and there were boys in the picture, I asked if it was time for me to get my own [purity] ring. My mom gave me one that has a circle on it, to represent the circle of marriage” (*MG* 241). Within both its discourse and metadiscourse, *Hannah Montana* treats teen sexuality so lightly and endorses virginity so earnestly that many parents would likely applaud its Disneyfication of sexuality for young viewers.

In line with this ethos of innocence, *Hannah Montana* flirts with issues of tween sexuality only obliquely, yet in casting Brooke Shields as Miley’s deceased mother, it encodes a queer layer of sexual transgression and

commercialism that it concomitantly purifies. Shields burst into the limelight in a string of provocative films, including *Alice Sweet Alice* (1976) and *King of the Gypsies* (1978) but more notoriously *The Blue Lagoon* (1980) and *Endless Love* (1981), which featured frank depictions of teen eroticism. Additional controversy accompanied her commercials for Calvin Klein jeans, including one in which she purred, “Do you know what comes between me and my Calvins? Nothing.” *Hannah Montana* reminds its parental audience of this connection when they learn the name of Miley’s horse: Blue Jeans. The risqué blue jeans of Shields’s past are resignified into a reminder of Miley’s simpler life in Tennessee, washing away the lingering aura of pedophilia that many viewers found so unsettling in Shields’s adolescent commercial career. With the specters of her past behind her and now donning a maternal image, Shields imparts loving wisdom to Miley from beyond the grave, such as in her comforting declaration, “You were loved before you were Hannah Montana, and you’ll be loved long after Hannah’s on one of those ‘Where are they now?’ shows” (“I Am Hannah, Hear Me Croak”; fig. 5.4). Child viewers are unlikely to know of Shields’s career highlights from the early 1980s, yet in recoding her sexually charged past through the wholesome image of Miley’s deceased mother, *Hannah Montana* also rewrites the scripts of Cyrus’s sexually incendiary stunts, suggesting it is a phase that she will grow out of, just as her television mother did. From this vantage point, Miley’s determined innocence reveals its queer



FIGURE 5.4 Brooke Shields, as a sexually suggestive tween in her youth and as Miley’s mother in *Hannah Montana*, models the recuperation of the sexualized youth in adulthood.

subtext, for viewers realize that, just like her fictional mother, a provocative sense of adolescent sexuality is hiding beneath her plucky exterior.

Allegory and Marketing Cyrus's Queer Evolution in *Hannah Montana*

Whereas *Hannah Montana* disavows teen sexuality throughout its story lines, its cagey thematizing of marketing and of Miley's and Cyrus's authenticity prepares its young audience to accompany Cyrus through her post-Hannah metamorphosis into a titillating and openly queer pop star. This transition into a sexual provocateur, as well as her later coming out as pansexual, coincides with, and becomes allegorized into, Hannah's quest for authenticity as an artist. The litany of Cyrus's sexually titillating, headline-grabbing acts during and following her years as Hannah Montana bespeaks her continuous efforts to align her celebrity with her changing age and audience. Midway through the show's run, she posed for a June 2008 *Vanity Fair* photo shoot with Annie Leibovitz that portrayed her draped in bed sheets, her bare back suggesting nudity. An additional photo with her father, Billy Ray—with her bare midriff, his bare shoulders, she leaning into his lap as they hold hands—struck some readers as disturbingly incestuous and pedophilic. The manufactured controversy worked as intended, as Camille Paglia sardonically pointed out: "They knew perfectly well it would cause a storm. . . . I'm so tired of Annie Leibovitz."³¹ Cyrus dutifully apologized for the ensuing firestorm: "I took part in a photo shoot that was supposed to be 'artistic' and now, seeing the photographs and reading the story, I feel so embarrassed. . . . I never intended for any of this to happen and I apologize to my fans who I care so deeply about."³² Gary Marsh, the president of entertainment for Disney Channel Worldwide, chided his star, warning her to maintain her all-American image: "For Miley Cyrus to be a 'good girl' is now a business decision for her. Parents have invested in her a godliness. If she violates that trust, she won't get it back."³³

Negotiating among children's innocence, adolescent maturation, and adult provocation, Cyrus detailed her muddled understanding of her status as a children's role model: "My job is to be a role model, and that's what I want to do, but my job isn't to be a parent. . . . My job isn't to tell your kids how to act or how not to act, because I'm still figuring that out for myself. So to take that away from me is a bit selfish. Your kids are going to make mistakes whether I do or not. That's just life."³⁴ Cyrus's jumbled words bespeak the difficulty of pinning down a coherent celebrity identity for her throughout her many personas. She claims her responsibility to be a role model—presumably one of whom parents would approve—but then asserts for herself the right to be a typical adolescent who will make frequent mistakes—thus distancing herself from the position of role model that she has previously claimed. Many public

appearances continued to shock some fans, including her August 2009 performance at the Teen Choice Awards, in which she spun around a stripper pole while singing “Party in the USA.” Anticipating the conclusion of *Hannah Montana*, the June 2010 release of her “Can’t Be Tamed” single, with the lyrics “I go through guys like money flyin’ out the hands” and a video with risqué costuming, announced a striking shift in her celebrity persona. Perhaps the incident that generated the most controversy was her August 2013 performance at MTV’s Video Music Awards, in which she twerked—a dance move symbolic of anal sex—with Robin Thicke. The backlash included such comments as news host Mika Brzezinski’s pointed criticism: “There’s pushing the envelope and there’s porn—there’s raunchy porn that’s disgusting and disturbing.”³⁵ Various other incidents extensively covered in the entertainment media—penis birthday cakes, daring haircuts, selfies in various stages of dis-habile with her surprisingly nimble tongue in exaggerated display—testify to Cyrus’s strategic marketing of herself to a public always eager to learn of her latest escapades. Unsurprisingly, many children and their parents were taken aback by this new image, castigating her for her actions, particularly while she still inhabited the tween-friendly role of Hannah Montana.

Yet because the lines between Cyrus, Miley, and Hannah are drawn with such cagey ambiguity, parents who would discourage their children from following the post-*Hannah Montana* version of Cyrus are cast as, in effect, stifling their children’s psychosexual development—at least within the moral universe of the program, which frequently emphasizes the need to let children assume responsibility for themselves. When Robby Ray is injured and cannot fly with Miley to Florida, she tricks her bodyguard, Roxy, into accompanying her. Furious at Miley’s disobedience, Robby Ray ultimately learns that he is inhibiting his daughter’s maturation, as Jackson points out to him: “I mean, you raised us to believe we could do anything we set our minds to. And the whole time we were growing up, you told us, ‘I know you can do it. So get ready, get set, go.’ Why aren’t you saying that now?” Robby Ray realizes that Miley is mature enough to travel across the country without him and sings “Ready, Set, Don’t Go”—an ode to the difficulties parents face in letting their children establish their independence. He then tells her, “No daddy wants to see his little girl grow up, every dad knows some day she has to” (“I Want You to Want Me . . . To Go to Florida”). The episode’s implicit lesson for adult viewers is that they, too, must let their children blaze new paths, even those that they are not yet ready to let them embark on.

Two contrasting episodes—“Yet Another Side of Me” and “Hannah’s Gonna Get This”—dramatize the quandary Hannah faces in developing as an artist: whether to remain true to her musical roots and to her current fans or to experiment with new genres and risk alienating these fans, with these story lines allegorically framing the question of her sexual maturation. In “Yet

Another Side of Me,” Hannah encounters Isis, the long-standing queen of pop obviously modeled on Madonna. (The writers allude to Madonna’s hits in Isis’s repertoire—“Material Girl” becomes “Immaterial Girl,” “Express Yourself” becomes “Impress Yourself.”) Intimidated by Isis’s career longevity and convinced by her advice to be perpetually preparing her next incarnation, Miley abandons her musical roots for a thrash metal sound, singing about her former days as a “nice girl”—one who obeyed her parents but now finds herself bored by such youthful innocence. By this episode’s end, after Hannah has a nightmare of tween girls rioting to her song at a wholesome Sunshine Girls event, she seeks Robby Ray’s guidance. “There’s got to be a way to keep them interested and still be me,” she laments, with her father advising authenticity as the solution to her dilemma: “As long as you’re true to yourself, your fans will always be there.” Hannah rejects the sexually suggestive aspects of this new persona, telling her costume designer, Dahli, “I won’t be needing the torn fishnets, the combat boots, or the bullwhip,” with these accessories hinting at a sadomasochistic, dominatrix outfit. The episode ends as Hannah discovers that Isis has fashioned herself into a Hannah Montana clone for her latest reincarnation, so Hannah’s authenticity contrasts with Isis’s inauthenticity, proving the superiority of the adolescent who knows herself and, in this instance, rejects a hypersexualized persona in favor of continued innocence.

While it is easy to mock Madonna, it is not so easy to enjoy her striking career longevity in a pop-culture arena where the vast majority of performers—even those who experience great success—maintain their fame for only a few years. So as much as Hannah refuses to change her act in “Yet Another Side of Me,” she updates her sound and image in “Hannah’s Gonna Get This.” Further testifying to the sitcom’s interest in the marketing of pop stars, pop songs, and pop merchandise, her producer hires a focus group of young fans to discuss their reactions to her new release “This Boy, That Girl.” This song pulses to a techno beat that metonymically represents sexuality—in contrast to the innocent, bubble-gum pop of traditional Hannah fare. Of the focus group member who appreciates her artistic evolution, Hannah declares, “See, somebody’s not afraid to let an artist grow. I mean, clearly my audience is wise beyond their years.” The balloting is close, however, so Hannah encourages the children who voted against her new sound to embrace change: “Now, look, I know change can be scary, but it’s a part of growing up. It’s how we find out who we are and who we’re gonna be. Change is exciting, and it’s fun, just like this song, and that’s why I love it, and you guys should love it, too.” One little girl whimpers, “I don’t want you to change. I love you just the way you are.” With Hannah caught in the double bind of pleasing some fans and displeasing others, Robby Ray again advises her to pursue authenticity as her primary goal: “Any time an artist tries to grow, there’s always gonna be people who don’t like it. You just gotta ask yourself, are you gonna listen to the

naysayers, or are you gonna listen to your heart?” Miley offers an unenthusiastic rebuttal—“Well, when the naysayers are crying seven year olds, your heart kinda gets torn”—but the evolution that the sitcom has evaded in its surface treatment of sexuality now approaches, as Robby Ray again encourages her to be true to herself: “Well, I’m proud of you, honey, for trying to make all your fans happy, but since you can’t do that, the one that you really need to make happy is you.”

With Hannah maintaining her authenticity as an artist and moving in a new musical direction, she sparks a controversy when she publically confesses her alter ego of Miley Stewart, which parallels Cyrus’s assumption of her risqué and increasingly queer celebrity persona. These “coming out” episodes function on the narrative level as the climax of the series’ story arc, yet they concomitantly assume queer inflections within the metadiscourse concerning Cyrus’s celebrity persona. On Colin Lassiter’s interview program, adults phone in to voice their outrage over Miley’s revelation. One tells her, “You ought to be ashamed of yourself,” to which Miley responds: “What? All I did was tell the truth.” The parent angrily replies, “A little late for that now! How am I supposed to teach my kid to be honest when her hero is nothing but a liar?” and hangs up. Cyrus’s sexually provocative stunts are resignified into the “truth” of Hannah’s confession of her identity, which thus becomes defensible as the “truth” of Cyrus’s identity as an artist. The episode continues as Miley defends herself to Lassiter, declaring “I was just trying to do what felt right for me,” and he consoles her, “Well, don’t worry, sweetheart. Some parents are just a little overprotective.” Lassiter then adds, “It’s not as if she’s a licensed child psychologist,” apparently disqualifying the caller’s comments as uninformed. In a comic twist, he reverses course by introducing the next caller—licensed child psychologist Dr. Mark Lynch. Lynch emphasizes the disastrous consequences of Hannah’s confession:

LYNCH: Miley, I think you’ve done a wonderful thing for yourself.

MILEY: Thank you, doctor.

LYNCH: Unfortunately, it may prove catastrophic for children everywhere.

MILEY: Huh?

LYNCH: Hannah Montana was real for children, and well, how do I say this in a way you’ll understand? You killed her.

LASSITER: Wow! People hate you. (“Kiss It Goodbye”)

Given Lynch’s hyperbolic argument—that Hannah Montana, like Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, is a beloved children’s fantasy that must be preserved—Miley’s position of honesty is ironically validated. And so within the sitcom’s allegorical metadiscourse, Cyrus’s sexualized performances are naturalized as part of her growth as an artist. As the analogy implies, just as parents cannot

preserve their children in the eternal stasis of believing in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy, they must allow their children to enjoy Hannah's artistic metamorphosis to better appreciate Cyrus's queer transition into adult stardom.

As the father both of Hannah Montana and of the divisive pop star, Robby Ray/Billy Ray Cyrus defends his daughter. On the program, Robby Ray disparages the parents who object to her revelation: "Most of those people who called in are a bunch of stopped-up adults who probably don't have enough fiber in their diets." *Hannah Montana* then depicts Miley moving past these criticisms to perform again, as Aunt Dolly, hosting a musical special, introduces Hannah to the audience: "Well, I want to introduce somebody to you now that's been getting a lot of criticism lately, but she is not gonna let that stop her from doing what she loves to do, and that is singing for you." The children in the audience cry out "We love you, Miley," proving her enduring appeal as she sings "Kiss It Goodbye," a song of personal transformation that includes the lyric "I'm a different girl" ("Kiss It Goodbye"). With real life again echoing the program, Parton defended Cyrus's controversial transition. Guy Trebay documents that "when asked whether she was shocked by Ms. Cyrus's rapid shift from . . . a 'wholesome teenager' to a 'raunchy performer,' Ms. Parton said, 'Well, yeah, but in a good way.'"³⁶ For Cyrus's star to continue rising, she must convince tween viewers to accept her "coming out" as a different girl, with her show promoting this sexual evolution within the muted tones of a family sitcom reticent to address teen sexuality.

Even light kisses rarely appear on *Hannah Montana*, yet Miley/Hannah effectively lays the groundwork for Cyrus's sexual and celebrity metamorphosis through the power of marketing. In constructing the character's authenticity, her outsider status, her relatability to her fans, and her ethical values as a spokesperson, Miley wins over tween viewers and their parents through her surface authenticity that allows queer countercurrents to overcome tween innocence. And as Cyrus's career has flourished in the years since *Hannah Montana's* conclusion, she has continually shifted her erotic image while maintaining the pseudo-authenticity key to her enduring success, particularly in her advocacy for homeless queer youth. The *New York Times* praised her as "a natural avatar for a post-gender generation,"³⁷ and she recently declared her ecumenical erotic interests: "I'm very open about my sexuality—I am pan-sexual."³⁸ She also proclaims of herself, "Everything I've ever done has been true to me at that minute," a statement of eternal authenticity that bedazzles with its chameleon play of time, image, and truth, in its collapsing of tween innocence and provocative queerness.³⁹ As *Hannah Montana* proceeded from its tween roots and its star began emphasizing her sexuality and her desire to evolve as an artist, the show demonstrates that, even when children's sexual innocence is used as a primary marketing tool, it is simply preparing young consumers for the moment when they can be treated to the flip side of Miley's

winsome wholesomeness. Sex sells, even, paradoxically, when tween marketing is predicated on its absence and an accompanying sub-rosa allegory of an erotic evolution. The long-standing fantasies of the domestic sitcom imbue *Hanna Montana* with much of its appeal and its queer subversions of this appeal, but in refusing to address sexuality candidly, the program resisted contemporary efforts to present the American family in a new and forthright erotic perspective finally freed from the sitcom mores of yesteryear—a dynamic that was concurrently pursued in *Modern Family* (2009–), as the following chapter investigates.