

# Gen-X Hamlets: Imitating the Dane to Find a Personal American Masculinity

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After being long considered box-office poison, 1990s Hollywood embraced Shakespeare, in direct adaptations of his plays—from *Henry V* (1989) to *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996)—and refashionings of his works—from the silly *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) to the controversial *O* (2001). However this acknowledgment of Shakespeare's popularity reached critical mass with 1990s adaptations, revisionings and references to his longest and most complex play, *Hamlet*. An intriguing subset of popularized Hamlets featured and targeted twentysomethings—these films wove Shakespeare's play into their narrative as a shorthand for the search for a genuine American masculinity, a masculinity that would serve both men and women.

*Hamlet* has been pressed into cultural service in the United States before. Lawrence Levine writes that in nineteenth-century America, *Hamlet* was a favorite foundation of burlesques and parodies (13). More recently, the 1960s musical *Hair* used *Hamlet* to resist patriarchal mandates:

What a piece of work is man  
How noble in reason  
How dare they try to end this beauty?  
How dare they try to end this beauty?  
Walking in space  
We find the purpose of peace

The beauty of life  
 You can no longer hide  
 Our eyes are open  
 Our eyes are open  
 Our eyes are open  
 Our eyes are open  
 Wide wide wide!<sup>1</sup>

*Hamlet* is an important touchstone for the musical *Hair: The American Tribal Love Rock Musical*, written by Gerome Ragni and James Rado in 1966. This relationship is most obvious in the above song “What a Piece of Work is Man,” but the play is also quoted, likewise unattributed, as dialogue and in the final number. Most of these references are associated with Claude (a young Claudius?) Bukowski, while he is contemplating whether he will respond to his draft notice, whether he will follow the patriarchal command to become a warrior. The struggle of the male characters in *Hair* to find a path that is more moral and heartfelt than the path of their fathers finds resonance with the introspection of Prince Hamlet.

Though generational conflict may have become more subtle, *Hamlet* reappeared as the referent of choice in American films of the 1990s to voice the angst and personal crises of male protagonists, as evidenced by the boom in *Hamlet* on film and on stage. Both Franco Zeffirelli’s and Kenneth Branagh’s films of *Hamlet* (1990; 1996) featured handsome and active leading actors close to Hamlet’s chronological age (Mel Gibson; Kenneth Branagh), as well as younger Ophelias (Helena Bonham-Carter; Kate Winslet) that were highly attractive. Widely distributed television productions also bookmarked the decade with Kevin Kline in 1990 and Campbell Scott in 2000, while Keanu Reeves’s turn as the Dane in *Manitoba* received wide press attention. With these productions deliberately presenting a Hamlet and an Ophelia that young adults could identify with, it is not surprising that Hamlet-associated protagonists appeared soon after in youth-oriented films: *True Romance* (1993); *Clueless* (1995); *Beautiful Girls* (1996); *Grosse Pointe Blank* (1997); *Two Girls and a Guy* (1997); and *Best Men* (1997). These *Hamlet*-quoting films were then capped by a complete American Gen-X production, Michael Almereyda’s *Hamlet* (2000) with Ethan Hawke and Julia Stiles.

These Gen-X films follow *Hair*’s strategy of treating their references to *Hamlet* with wit, weaving them into the text in an offhand way, seamlessly mixing Shakespeare’s lines with contemporary dialogue-signaling more significant parallels between the construction of the two texts, similar to the intertextual relationship between *Hair* and *Hamlet*. The song “What a Piece of Work is Man” begins with its slight reordering of Hamlet’s rumination to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (2.2.303-317), before moving gracefully into a quotation (reprise) of “Walking in Space,” a reflective song about the inter-connectedness of God, life and beauty. Likewise, the ending stanza of *Hair*’s finale “Flesh Failures” quotes the dying words of both Romeo and Hamlet, before moving into “Let

the Sunshine In.” *Hamlet* is not the final authority for *Hair*’s protagonists, but the inspiration, their moral foundation. Similarly, these Gen-X films combine Shakespeare and popular cultural references as their heroes struggle to find their moral footing.

Of course, this interpretation of Hamlet as a moral figure is not without its problems. Harold Bloom, who has achieved his own success bridging the high-brow and the popular, has written obsessively on *Hamlet*, most recently with his book *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited*. However, he does not believe that his obsession with Hamlet is unique to himself: “Contrary doubtless to Shakespeare’s intentions, *Hamlet* has become the center of a secular scripture” (3). In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Bloom goes even farther, proposing that Shakespeare’s characters, with Hamlet leading the way, actually presented the model for individual personhood for Western culture: “The dominant Shakespearean characters...are extraordinary instances not only of how meaning gets started, rather than repeated, but also of how new modes of consciousness came into being” (xviii). In today’s secular, multicultural global culture, the text of *Hamlet* has emerged as a contemplation on morality, in particular the relevance of revenge.

But is Hamlet moral? John Updike, an author who has explored the problems of American masculinity, wrote the novel *Gertrude and Claudius* (2000) to reveal “Hamlet’s impenetrable self-centeredness” (211). His novel follows the critical reading of Hamlet as an amoral, violent villain, who pulls flawed but largely decent characters (aside from fratricide, Updike finds Claudius to be a “capable king”) to their deaths. Though American popular culture may largely prefer Bloom’s Hamlet, the ghost of Updike’s sociopath is a potential that these Hamlet-identified protagonists must face.

This essay explores Hamlet’s relationship to American masculinity and popular culture, and why this relationship resonated in the 1990s in general and in youth films in particular. Likewise, this essay interrogates why a revised *Hamlet* was repeatedly presented as key to American society’s desire for a new-and-improved masculinity.

## American Dane

The way that *Hamlet* has moved into contemporary American culture differs significantly from how other plays have been appropriated. Several of Shakespeare’s plays have been retold: *Romeo and Juliet* as the musical *West Side Story* (1957); *King Lear* as *Harry and Tonto* (1974) and the novel *A Thousand Acres* (1991); *Macbeth* as *Men of Respect* (2001) and *Scotland, PA* (2001); *Taming of the Shrew* as the musical *Kiss Me, Kate* (1948) and a *Moonlighting* episode, “Atomic Shakespeare” (1986). These translations are possible, I suggest, because these plays are popularly known for their plots. Though *Romeo and Juliet* may appear to be “adapted” more frequently than *Hamlet* in popular culture, those modern appropriations generally limit their relationship to Shakespeare’s play to the portrayal of “star-crossed lovers” whose union is delayed because of family

prejudices. The updated characters rarely have much in common with Romeo or Juliet outside of their romantic situation; the supporting characters are barely present, and the other themes and questions of the Shakespearean text are dropped.

However, the popular knowledge of *Hamlet* revolves specifically around its characters, particularly Hamlet, and the themes of the text; the fascination for these characters revolves more around their general situation and relationships, with only secondary interest in the specific action of *Hamlet*. These characters and their words exist as cultural icons, which have been sprinkled liberally through American film, television, advertising, music, and books. *Hamlet* may be as much a part of American cultural literacy as the *Simpsons*: “to be or not to be” is as widely known as Homer Simpson’s “D’oh!”

The role of Hamlet is in many ways constructed to invite close identification: he has more lines than any other Shakespeare character and his most intimate moments are shared only with the audience. In her analysis of his most famous monologue, Edna Zwick Boris notes that there are no direct references to the specific instances or people in his life—including to himself: “Everything in the ‘To be’ speech is expressed in the first person plural (‘we,’ ‘us’), or in third person (‘who’), or in those famous infinitive phrases, which set up an opening rhythm as familiar as the opening four notes of Beethoven’s 5th Symphony” (23). The inclusiveness of the rhetoric approach during his most memorable scene may explain the power of the empathic bond toward Hamlet; eighteenth-century critic William Hazlitt proclaimed in 1817, “It is *we* who are Hamlet” (74). C. L. Barber and Richard P. Wheeler label the play “a failure” because it demands such a sympathetic identification that any real critical perspective of Hamlet’s actions is impossible (266). Bristol confirms Hamlet’s continuing appeal: “The irresistibly seductive melancholy of Hamlet continues to resonate through contemporary popular culture, because Hamlet continues to explain who and what we are” (206). Though these critics do not establish the validity of Hamlet’s answers or if he truly deserves our total sympathy, they confirm the strong connection that he inspires. And this connection is about questioning, both oneself and society.

As irresistible as Hamlet seems to be in many cultures, there may exist a particular affinity between Prince Hamlet and America. A number of critics have described nineteenth-century America’s embracing of Hamlet as embodying both the conflict between feudal monarchy and enlightened democracy and the “speculative genius” of the age (Bristol 211). Lawrence Levine believes that early Americans saw a connection between their emerging ideology and Shakespeare:

... Shakespeare’s thought patterns were either close enough or made to seem close enough so that the violence had a point, and that point appeared to buttress American values and confirm American expectations. This ideological equation, this ability of Shakespeare to connect with America’s underlying beliefs, is crucial to an understanding of his role in nineteenth-century America (42).

For all his delay, in the last act Hamlet affirms violence that has a point. Leslie Fiedler, probably inspired by Emerson, saw Hamlet and Caliban as the Shakespearean characters most reflecting Americans' view of themselves as wronged or dispossessed sons. Hamlet's melancholy, his sense of grievance, is internalized as "an answerable revolt against inherited obligations." Fiedler goes on to note that neither Hamlet nor Caliban can escape the narrative logics in which they are inscribed (212), but in the narratives of American texts that appropriate *Hamlet*, our favorite prince can and often does escape his inherited burdens. Bloom believes that Hamlet returns from the sea in the Act V with a self-understanding and strength ("the freest author of himself in all of literature" [*Hamlet* 51]) that Claudius' trap prevents him from living. The Hamlets of these contemporary versions live to enjoy Hamlet's potential as a free author, no longer a puppet of his own crossed purposes or paternal burdens.

Of course, *Hamlet* is a very popular play outside of America as well. But popularizations of *Hamlet* in other cultures differ from Americanized Hamlets. For example, in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966), Kenneth Branagh's film *A Midwinter's Tale* (UK title *In the Bleak Midwinter* 1995) and Charlotte Smith's play *Humble Boy* (2001), the protagonists may be rudderless, but they do not have the pent-up frustration and hostility that the Hamlet-figure has in American retellings. British quasi-Hamlets are sweet mama's boys who are figuring out what they will do when they grow up—that is, if they get around to it. American Hamlet-figures are less comfortable with their indecision, thrashing between the pressures to become a man (like their father) that they don't want to be, and finding that new man that they can be. Though *Hamlet* is also popular in Japan, Akira Kurosawa conspicuously chose to adapt *Macbeth* (*Throne of Blood* 1957) and *King Lear* (*Ran* 1985). Perhaps Hamlet's search for his personal motivation and identity resonates less with Japan's feudal legacy than *Macbeth* and *King Lear*.

As important as the Melancholy Dane has been to the American psyche, his presence in references, appropriations and adaptations became especially ubiquitous in the 1990s, almost a return to the position Levine describes as *Hamlet* holding in the nineteenth century. For the majority of the twentieth century, Levine posits Shakespeare as being confined to high culture, "the possession of the educated portions of society who disseminated his plays for the enlightenment of the average folk" (31). This change at the end of the twentieth century comes partly from the moves of postmodernism to break down the authority of high culture, mingling high and low artifacts to create more vibrant popular forms. Similarly, the work of Shakespeare popularizers from the 1960s on—most notably Joseph Papp and Franco Zeffirelli but including Shakespeare festival and park productions throughout North America—gradually exposed a segment of the population to a Shakespeare that was fun and relevant. When Hollywood returned to Shakespeare after decades of denouncing it as "box-office poison," America was ready. As significant as actor Edwin Booth was to the nineteenth-

century American vision of Prince Hamlet, more Americans have seen Mel Gibson's performance—or may yet catch it on DVD.

Thomas Cartelli describes the various methods of Shakespearean appropriation / adaptation, but the mode that best describes the way *Hamlet* references are most frequently used in American popular culture is *dialogic*. This involves “the careful integration into a work of allusions, identifications and quotations that complicate, ‘thicken’ and qualify that work’s primary narrative line to the extent that each partner to the transaction may be said to enter into the other’s frame of reference” (Cartelli 18). Even in films that quote a single line, there often are structural parallels, as if the writer chose the *Hamlet* reference to signal the less visible appropriations of the text, their intimate intertextual relationship to *Hamlet*. For example, in *Clueless*, a Shakespearean debate between two female characters signals the Hamlet-like qualities of the guy for whose attention they are battling; Josh (Paul Rudd) is a fatherless young man, ambivalent toward his remarried mother, and searching for his own path.

Many might assume that *Hamlet* references are limited to famous lines. Indeed, “to be or not to be,” “the undiscovered country,” “to sleep perchance to dream,” and “to thine ownself be true” frequently appear in advertising and other media divorced from their darker contexts. But what is surprising is how often these filmic appropriations run deeper, an intertextual relationship in a dialogic fashion. Taking issue with Frederic Jameson’s characterization of postmodern pastiche as “dead language,” Linda Hutcheon argues that “through a double process of installing and ironizing, parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (93). These reworkings of Hamlet affirm the Dane’s quest, yet subvert his tragic destiny, rejecting the ideological consequences of his death march and choosing a different fork in the process of self-examination.

As a model of a dialogic adaptation, *Hamlet* references are essential to the structure of the farcical Arthur Hiller’s 1987 *Outrageous Fortune*—as is evident from the title alone. Though this film appeared before the 1990s explosion of *Hamlet*-sampling films and Hollywood productions, the film presents a distaff model of the intertextual relationship later found in *Hamlet*-sampling comedies and youth films. Sandy (Shelley Long) is a perpetually studying actress, who aspires to play Hamlet, a dream that is funded by her unseen, wealthy father. *Hamlet* is ubiquitous throughout the opening of the film: Sandy meets Loren (Bette Midler), an ex-pornography actress, at an audition for a legendary acting instructor; a poster for *Hamlet* hangs in the reception area and Sandy has prepared Ophelia’s scene for her audition. During class, Loren says that she is unfamiliar with the play: “*Hamlet*? How am I gonna know *Hamlet*?!” Sandy condescendingly replies: “Well, you should if you’re going to be an actress.” From the beginning, the two lead characters are defined by their relationship to *Hamlet*.

As the film moves into a comic thriller, the two women must work together to save their own lives, learning to recognize corruption and their true character.

Through its extensive use of *Hamlet*, *Outrageous Fortune* demonstrates many of *Hamlet*'s American popular cultural associations:

- 1) The film features a hyper-awareness of the theatrical, both on- and off-stage;
- 2) The character most associated with Hamlet (Sandy) is positioned as possessing the most integrity and potential;
- 3) Her father is a remote character whose way of life she has rejected;
- 4) After a process of self-discovery, Sandy directly challenges accepted notions, i.e. that being female prevents her from being heroic or from playing *Hamlet*.
- 5) Loren demonstrates that exposure to *Hamlet* deepens character—and the corollary that “common” people often bring more insight to the text than the highly-educated: “[Hamlet]’s a wimp—look at him. He can’t make up his mind about anything. He stands around all night going ‘what’ll I do?, what’ll I do?’ Give me Romeo or Henry V—now there’s a guy I can boff.”

The above tropes reappear in some combination with most popular culture *Hamlet* allusions.

The protagonists of these 1990s *Hamlet*-quoting comedies align themselves with Prince Hamlet to validate their resistance to a “passing generation,” in the broadest sense of the word. Denying filial duty to an unfulfilling patriarchal order, these films encourage a self-assessment and self-determination that promotes personal fulfillment and emotional intimacy. Harold Bloom writes: “We want to hear Hamlet on everything, the way we hear Montaigne, Goethe, Emerson, Nietzsche and Freud. Shakespeare, having broken into the mode of the poem unlimited, closed it so that we would always go on needing to hear more” (*Hamlet* 154). Popular culture, in particular North American culture, has responded to this driving need to hear Hamlet’s further musings by reincarnating him as a character in their novels, plays, films and television episodes: “There is an end to Hamlet, but not to Hamlet: he comes alive at the wake. His whoreson dead body, after four centuries, has not decayed” (Bloom, *Hamlet* 120). In the 1990s, Hollywood agreed with Bloom.

## 1990s Quest for a New American Manhood

We are the middle children of History, man, with no purpose or place; we have no great war, no great depression; our great war is a spirit war, our great depression's our lives.

—Tyler Durden, *Fight Club* (1997)

As in the film *Fight Club*, 1990s popular culture presented the “crisis” of white masculinity, experienced simultaneously by two generations of American males: Baby-Boomers (born 1946–61) and Generation-Xers (born 1961–81). While Baby-Boomers may be suffering the after effects of a hyper-masculinity, that has proven toxic and irrelevant—like the man in *Fight Club* whose steroid abuse led to testicular cancer—Gen-Xers are presented, like Tyler, as having been raised by strong women with absent or failing male role models. The lack of real political or economic crisis in the 1990s left both groups with no rallying purpose, as well as the luxury for their existential crisis. Whether white men actually were in crisis in the 1990s is less interesting than its ubiquitous portrayal in the media and the antidotes presented.

Though Baby Boomers had experienced living through major historical events, the ideologies that had fueled their early lives seemed to run out of steam as they approached middle age. While the Reagan era made white men feel proud again to be aggressive capitalists—after the uncertainties of the 1960s and 1970s—their sacrifice of self was no longer valued as 1980s’ values were debunked. In *Wall Street* (1987), Gordon Gecko may proclaim “greed is good,” but he ends the film in handcuffs. This sense of men-in-crisis was most apparent with the best-selling *Iron John* (1990) by Robert Bly, and the accompanying men’s groups that sprung up around the country. David Savran writes: “The self-appointed guardians of male spirituality are unanimous in imagining masculinity as a fragile and vulnerable commodity—oppressed with ‘internalized oppression’” (296).

On screen, a wide range of films portrayed middle-aged men realizing the emotional emptiness of their lives, and taking extreme actions to reclaim their better selves: transformations into women in *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993) and *Junior* (1994); switching identities in *Shattered* (1991), and *Face/Off* (1997); holiday transformations in *Santa Clause* (1994), *Jingle All the Way* (1996) and *Jack Frost* (1998); and the miscellaneous physical trauma of *The Fisher King* (1991), *The Doctor* (1991), *City Slickers* (1991), and *Regarding Henry* (1991). Though these films all end with a celebration of the reformed, sensitive husband/father/lover/friend, Pfeil (speaking specifically about the last four films) rightly points out the profound distrust of the masculinity implied by these films: “If white straight men cannot be changed short of shooting them, there is not much use pressing them to do so” (61). Similarly Krister Friday sees this portrayed crisis as one “that produces conspicuous symptoms and necessitates even more conspicuous remedies” and Sally Robinson argues that these crisis narratives allow white men

to “mark” themselves as distinctive, even if that “marking” is the only thing that makes them visible in their eroding position (2). Methinks the gentlemen doth protest too much.

During this same period, *Hamlet* first appeared in formulaic, mainstream comedies: *L.A. Story* (1991), *Last Action Hero* (1993), *North* (1994), and *Renaissance Man* (1995). In addition, *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country* (1991) is dependent on *Hamlet* not only for its title but also for the majority of the film’s comic elements. On stage, the comedies *I Hate Hamlet* (1991), and *The Compleat Works of Wllm Shkspr (abridged)* [the second act is a condensed *Hamlet* spoof] were commercial hits. These broad comedies are particularly interested in gender roles, definitions of success and the Peter-Pan nature of American adults. In the end, they promote a tweaking of the social order with increased emotional intimacy; the protagonists’ identification with Hamlet is key to his/her success.

These films appear during the same post-Reagan period covered by Alan Nadel in *Flatlining on the Field of Dreams*. He sees at the base of many 1990s films a longing for an established order or an explanation: “. . . this national narrative is basically a domestic story, the story of Dad who is protector, provider, and, as it now appears, dead. But surely it cannot be death, just a death rehearsal” (50). This nostalgia is perfectly embodied by Kevin Costner in *Field of Dreams* (1989). Not coincidentally, the most earnest appropriation of *Hamlet* was during Costner’s courtroom speech in *JFK* (1991): “We’ve all become Hamlets in our country, children of a slain father leader whose killer still possesses the throne. The Ghost of John F. Kennedy confronts us with the secret murder at the heart of the American dream.” Whether this lost father is Kennedy or, as in Nadel’s view Ronald Reagan, the middle-aged protagonists of these films long for paternal direction.

Instead of being stuck in nostalgia and mourning, other 1990s films saw the “dead father” as an opportunity to challenge and transform past societal expectations. In films with middle-aged “Hamlets,” actual fathers are less criticized than patriarchal culture itself. For example, in *Renaissance Man* and *L.A. Story*, the protagonists turn their back on high-salaried jobs to lead more meaningful lives; *Hamlet* is invoked in *Star Trek VI* and *Last Action Hero* as part of an overall challenge to the validity of warrior culture (whether in space, on city streets or on the movie screen). Linda Charnes calls *L.A. Story* the “paradigmatic postmodern *Hamlet*” (13), with the loss of father as being secondary to the loss Logos or the Law that the father represents:

. . . we must ask what happens when a culture no longer believes, however fetishistically, in the integrity of paternal logos. To raise this question is not to nostalgize for a time when we all believed (if we ever believed) that father knows best. Rather it is to observe the increasing difficulty the placeholders of paternal authority have in hiding their own obscene doubles. . . . (16).

This lack of any genuine authority or order fuels the frenzied zaniness and superficiality of this Southern California society, which the more intellectual Harris (Steve Martin) finds himself trapped in. Harris, like other Hamlet-identified protagonists, must find new answers and establish his own Law.

If the Baby-Boomer masculinity crisis was imagined and promoted by the media, it could be argued that the entire character of Generation-X was defined and created by the media. The term itself is disparaging, a comment on the lack of distinction and direction that Baby-Boomers perceived as characterizing their successors. A term commonly used to describe white male Gen-Xers was “slackers,” a reaction to their constant videogaming, their grungy attire and their delay in mapping out their life’s goals. This vision of Gen-Xers was comically portrayed in films by Kevin Smith (*Clerks* 1994) and Richard Linklater (*Dazed and Confused* 1993).

Yet the dismissal of these young men as merely slackers ignores both the subtext of Gen-X films and the generation itself. As noted in *Fight Club*, this generation may lack not only a defining challenge but also a defining coming-of-age moment—like the Kennedy assassination or Watergate. However, according to a survey of Gen-X college students, this is not to say that they did not experience a moment in their early teen years when they realized that they lived in a troubled society—it is just that they responded to any one of five different events (Levine and Curtin 137). Similarly, they may appear to be less involved in student politics, but it is just that they are more likely to form local organizations than national ones, and again their issues are more diverse. Despite their lack of a visible, unified front, Gen-Xers are concerned: “They believe they are being made to assume responsibility unfairly for a horrendous array of social problems, selfishly created by their elders” (143). With this lack of faith in society and the previous generation, their delay can be seen as less like sloth and more deliberate, waiting to develop their appropriate plan of action.

One unifying characteristic of Gen-X might be their intimate relationship with popular culture, which again made them appear to be passive spectators. However, they actually have quite an active relationship to popular culture, as conversational shorthand, raw material and knowledge source. Jonathan I. Oake notes that Gen-X films are “highly intertextual with regard to visual culture” (85), as well as feature purposeful soundtracks; their referentiality is a deliberate tool in their quest, rather than empty pastiche. Their spectatorship serves both as cover from their elders and as their developmental process.

Supplementing the popular-culture references, *Hamlet* quotations in Gen-X films work not only as punch lines but also resonate with the period’s growing ambivalence toward past patriarchal structures. In looking at the American presidents familiar to Gen-Xers through the 1990s, it might be argued (as I do here playfully) that the public personas of Ronald Reagan, George H. Bush and Bill Clinton bear some resemblances respectively to King Hamlet, Polonius and Claudius. Reagan, like King Hamlet, urged a warrior/cowboy mentality, which

is both comforting and repulsive. Bush was a pragmatic bureaucrat and family man who, despite his actual war record, failed to get a handle on the “vision thing” and emerge as his own man. Like Claudius, Clinton presented a glittering and warm image—but he was also a man of great ambition and sexual appetite whose success was linked to his wife. Surrounded by ambiguous models of male leadership, it is not surprising that these young men shared Hamlet’s uncertainty as to what a “good” man would do.

In Cartelli’s examination of how *Hamlet* is appropriated, he offers this progressive vision of the Prince-formerly-known-as-indecisive:

Approached from *this* direction, *Hamlet* may be said to involve an understandably alienated individual’s attempt at self-determination in the face of a paternal imposition that presents revenge as a “natural” response to his dilemma and delay as an “unnatural” deviation from an obligation that has taken on the force of a moral imperative (88).

Following Cartelli’s vision of Hamlet, Gen-X protagonists who align themselves with the Dane—unlike Nadel’s protagonists—ultimately cast off their nighted colors and stop seeking their noble fathers; they pause only as long as it takes to become fully themselves. As Americans question traditional gender roles and try to build lives without role models, *Hamlet* appears to be the natural model for their negotiations.

### **The Slacker Prince**

The Hamlet-figures in Gen-X films differ from the comic Hamlets of *L.A. Story* and *The Last Action Hero* in several ways. First, instead of protagonists who are generally older than Hamlet, these protagonists are somewhat younger. Secondly, even though their “delay” in maturity is more natural because of their youth than the “Peter-Pan-Hamlets,” their pain and the pain of their friends and lovers is treated more seriously: these are generally darker comedies compared to their more parodic counterparts. Andreas Huyssen asks if postmodern samplings of the past are only about spectacle, therefore supporting the status quo, or do they “perhaps also express some genuine and legitimate dissatisfaction with modernity?” (185). While I’d say the former set of films are largely interested in spectacle, these latter films express some genuine dissatisfaction.

Lastly, these Hamlets seem to yearn for the loss of literal fathers as well as for the loss of Logos, a patriarchal order worth serving. These Gen-X Hamlets swim against Cartelli’s described tide, slowed down at the start by worn-out ideology. Charnes describes *Hamlet* as the first *noir* universe, a paranoid text “of surplus knowledge that leads, paradoxically, not to discovery but to undecidability” (5). As such, *Hamlet* embodies the mournful, wittily cynical malaise of Generation-X. These young male heroes follow Cartelli’s vision of Hamlet: understandably

alienated individuals whose delays are about self-determination, about deliberate indecision. In the end, these Hamlet-identified protagonists commit and act.

Epitomizing American Gen-Xers' identification with Hamlet is Michael Almereyda's *Hamlet* (2000). Almereyda skillfully transposes the Dane to the idle melancholy of a trust-fund prince, surrounded by a sympathetic company looking for a true leader in the gloom of Manhattan. Hamlet is a different man to different people: Zeffirelli followed the Freudian concept of Hamlet as a Mama's boy (with a Gertrude in her 40s); Branagh filmed the play in its entirety to capture the many excesses of the thwarted prince; and Almereyda adapted Shakespeare to bring us the melancholy Dane at his most morose. Almereyda is consistent in his portrayal of a subdued, desolate, self-reflective man who implodes from the rotten state of Denmark.

To emphasize the character's introspection and self-study, Ethan Hawke's Hamlet is an aspiring filmmaker, with himself as his favorite subject. The famous monologues appear in snippets as he edits his own image, or as moody voice-overs as he roams dark New York streets. In his adaptation, Almereyda has cut all of Hamlet's humor: the punch lines from his scenes with goofy Rosencrantz (Steve Zahn) and Guildenstern (Dachen Thurman); his antic behavior with Polonius (Bill Murray); and the entire gravedigger scene. It is hard to find any character who looks like "passion's slave"—rather the characters are destroyed by quiet desperation. Even the rousing, competitive final duel is restrained—literally—as Hamlet and Horatio are rigged to a narrow, electronic fencing track.

Almereyda uses technology throughout the film to highlight the impersonal, disconnection of his characters. Hamlet is surrounded by his bank of video monitors, looking for manufactured images to guide him; Claudius delivers nasty orders by cell-phone; Hamlet's "Get thee to a nunnery" rants as a series of cruel, angry phone messages; Gertrude and Claudius make out while pumping Rosencrantz and Guildenstern for information on speaker-phone; and death edicts are delivered on laptops. Representing the present order, Claudius, Gertrude, and Polonius are always surrounded by sterile, ultra-modern surroundings.

Like Hawke's filmmaker, the Hamlet wannabes of *True Romance*, *Clueless*, *Beautiful Girls*, *Grosse Pointe Blank*, *Two Girls and a Guy* and *Best Men* are adrift in an impersonal, fragmented, postmodern world. Their only reliable guide is pop-culture, with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* revealed as their philosophical center. These films suggest that it is the *combination* of Shakespeare and pop-culture wisdom that seems to provide the best preparation for the end of the millennium. Freed from the confines of the Renaissance text, these Gen-X Hamlets present their personal versions of Hamlet, with a rewritten end that frees the Dane from his scripted fatal melancholy to a more promising end.

### Returning to Elsinore

Before these Hamlets can find their personal path, they must confront their unresolved issues with their parents. Almereyda's *Hamlet* was not Ethan Hawke's

first association with the melancholy prince. In the slacker comedy *Reality Bites* (1994), Hawke plays the drop out philosophy major Troy, who looks down on yuppie TV producer Michael (Ben Stiller): “he’s the reason why Cliff Notes were invented.” Troy passive/aggressively competes with Michael for the affections of Lelaina (Winona Ryder). As the film opens Troy is avoiding his family, employment and emotional intimacy. Though his studies prepared him for introspection, he ignores any authority beyond TV-Land sitcoms.

Embodying the stereotypical view of Gen-Xers, Troy and Lelaina’s cohorts are not only unable to find any answers—they fail to even formulate the right questions. In her valedictory speech that opens the film, Lelaina voices the dilemma of her graduating friends: “What are we going to do now? How can we repair all the damage that we inherited? Fellow graduates, the answer is simple. The answer is . . . [having lost her last notecard] I don’t know.” In a similar vein, Troy recalls when his father told him that all the answers could be heard inside a seashell—but he realized that the shell was empty: “There’s no point to any of this; it’s all just a random lottery of tragedy and near escapes. So I take pleasure in the details”—the details he mentions are all trademarked products. Troy uses this lack of meaningful paternal guidance as an excuse to drift and bum off Lelaina. His knowledge of philosophy only serves to justify his amoral existence, from the stealing of a candy bar to his vicious, self-indulgent music to his seducing and disposing of women. Similar to Hawke’s Hamlet, Troy’s dissatisfaction with society is presented as a weak excuse for his self-involved and callous behavior, and his philosophy is limited to unconnected fragments of popular culture.

Though Michael is dismissed as semi-literate, shallow and materialistic, he is ultimately revealed as more insightful and mature than expected. Though Michael is also immersed in consumer and popular cultures, he has retained shreds of his education that provide a foundation for him personally and professionally. After Troy publicly humiliates Lelaina in a manner reminiscent of the “get thee to a nunnery” speech, both men vainly run into the street to catch her. Michael calls Troy a court-jester: “And you know what happens to him? They find his skull in a grave, and they say, ‘O, I knew him and he was funny.’ And he died all alone.” Troy still refuses to recognize Michael’s depth or grasp of *Hamlet*: “Where did you learn that, at some renaissance festival?” But Michael’s evaluation of Troy is presented as more valid than Troy’s dismissal. When Troy tries to counter Michael’s lesson with, “Well, we all die alone,” Michael again sees through Troy’s pretenses: “Well, if that’s true, who are you looking for out here?” Though Michael has demonstrated his willingness to admit his failures and truly commit to Lelaina, Troy’s passion, perhaps like Hamlet at Ophelia’s gravesite, is motivated more by competition than by sincerity.

Troy is doubly humiliated in this showdown: both by Michael’s stinging (though inarticulate) analysis, and by his bursting Troy’s pretense that he is a Hamlet by identifying him instead as Yorick. Troy is the philosopher who cannot commit to a job or to the woman he loves; he is distracted by the lingering death

of the father who abandoned him; and he deliberately avoids any real conflict or emotion in favor of the superficial. He justifies his inactivity through his belief in his intellectual superiority—that Michael skewers by seeing that his wit is all gibes without substance. Only after traveling to his father’s deathbed, confronting his real pain and abandoning his antic behavior, can he move from the foolish Yorick to the princely Hamlet, in true mourning and penitence—ready to act and commit to Lelaina. By the end of the film, his philosophy serves his move toward intimacy rather than working as a buffer against it: he records a witty, existential phone message for his new apartment with Lelaina.

In *Clueless*, Shakespearean knowledge is claimed by the Ophelia-figure: Cher (Alicia Silverstone) is a fashion-driven, clique-conscious Beverly Hills teen, being raised by her Machiavellian trial-lawyer father Mel (Dan Hedaya). Like Michael, she has, to this point, been derided as superficial by the film’s Hamlet-figure: her ex-stepbrother Josh (Paul Rudd) is a sensitive, intellectual college student, who avoids his mother and her endless array of new husbands by sometimes living and working with her ex-husband Mel. Josh seems to feel equally ill at ease with the fashion pretensions of Beverly Hills and the intellectual pretensions of college life—all seems “weary, stale, flat and unprofitable.”

Josh unexpectedly finds his right path after rescuing Cher from a party. Driving Cher home, he is lectured by his “intellectual” college girlfriend Heather, dressed in the requisite black with a beret:

- Heather:* It’s just like Hamlet said, “to thine own self be true.”
- Cher:* No. Hamlet didn’t say that.
- Heather:* I think that I remember *Hamlet* accurately.
- Cher:* Well, I remember Mel Gibson accurately and he didn’t say that—that Polonius guy did.

Not only does Cher win the argument, but from this point on Cher is shown to have some depth. Josh drops Heather and his college life, interning more seriously with the Polonius-like Mel and guiltily enjoying the company of his culturally-immersed ex-stepsister.

In addition to modeling Cher on Jane Austen’s *Emma*, Amy Heckerling complicated her breezy comedy by characterizing Josh as Hamlet: a moody scholar, a young man of integrity, who is embarrassed by his mother’s remarriage. Josh’s soul-searching and sincere affection for Cher adds depth to this teen flick. *Clueless* further enhances its primary literary model by changing Cher/Emma’s father from the self-centered, hypochondriac of the Austen source to a concerned father/stepfather, who is also proficient in political maneuvering, presenting Polonius as a more useful father-figure than King Hamlet. There may be a reason that Heather sees Hamlet as living by Polonius’ words.

*Clueless* is not the only instance where Polonius’ role is intertwined with Hamlet’s. In *Grosse Pointe Blank*, it is the Polonius-figure who partially quotes

Hamlet's lines to the Hamlet-like Martin (John Cusack): "What a piece of work is man, how noble...fuck it, let's have a drink." Martin's girlfriend's father Bart Newberry (Mitch Ryan)—who identifies himself as "you know me, the same-old sellout"—disinterestedly articulates the musings of the self-imploding Martin, before denouncing the self-important pretension and delays of such ramblings. In dialogic fashion, Bart questions the wisdom of Hamlet—and by extension Martin.

Mr. Newberry's quotation of *Hamlet* signals the parallels that structure the film. Martin Blank fits the model of the Gen-X Hamlet: he is mourning both a literal, ineffective father and the absent Logos of a shifting ideology that has left him rudderless. Recognizing his own moral ambiguity—and escaping an alcoholic, distant father—he disappeared after high school and joined the army as an assassin. With the end of the Cold War, he was forced to go "freelance," an ideology-free position that makes it harder for him to justify himself. He had always told himself that his marks were never innocent, that they had done something that had brought him to their door, a rationalization that he no longer repeats with the same confidence.

Interfering with his self-reflection and assessment (he is seeing a psychiatrist) is a usurping father/king, his former colleague Grocer (Dan Ackroyd) is forming a collective of assassins that he insists Martin join. Like other Gen-X Hamlets, Martin's main focus is his own survival, denying his need to take responsibility: for most of the movie, he shouts, "It's not me" when confronted by his prospective targets, recalling Hamlet's denial of culpability to Laertes (5.2.234-40).

The occasion of his ten-year high school reunion forces him to confront the ghosts of his past and to make amends. Martin's main objective in *Grosse Pointe*—besides remaining alive—is to rekindle his relationship with his "Ophelia," the high school sweetheart Debi (Minnie Driver) that he cruelly abandoned. Instead of surprising her un-gyved, he stood her up on prom-night, disappearing for ten years without a word. While Debi is sane and alive, Martin must visit his mother in a mental institution and pours a bottle of scotch on his father's grave. Though he does not quote *Hamlet*, Martin quotes another literary figure that confirms the source and American-ness of his masculinity crisis: watching a young couple buy a house, he says, "I've always felt very temporary about myself"—Willy Loman, *The Death of a Salesman* (1949). Willy believed that the source of his temporariness is that he, like Martin, was abandoned by his father.

In addition to these thematic parallels between *Grosse Pointe Blank* and *Hamlet*, the film contains less obvious yet witty allusions to the play. His secretary—who watches out for danger—is named "Marcella;" in one scene she wears a military-style suit, recalling Marcellus' position as a soldier and guard. Martin's psychiatrist's books reflect *Hamlet* themes—*Annihilation of Death* and *The Warrior's Dilemma*—and were both *ghost-written*. Martin consistently dresses in black (nightly attire), leading his teacher to ask if he is a mortician. And my favorite is the theme-song for his visit to the site of his childhood home

which might be the musical answer to the question “to be or not to be”: “Live and Let Die.”

In the end, Martin survives where Hamlet and Willy Loman die because, after his introspective delays, he does commit to moral choices. Like the Ghost, Martin’s secretary Marcella (Joan Cusack) keeps telephoning him to kill his most recent mark, while Martin avoids even opening the instruction envelope. At the same time, he is ducking the lethal treachery of both Mr. Grocer and C.I.A. agents (the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern figures). When Martin learns that his mark is Mr. Newberry, he chooses to not kill “Polonius.” Simultaneously, Mr. Newberry proves that, unlike Polonius, he deserves to live: rather than an amoral Machiavellian, Mr. Newberry is a mark because he is standing up against corporate corruption. Martin wins his face-off against “Claudius” (Grocer) and his henchman, to save lives that are worthy: Mr. Newberry, Debi, and his own. Though the beginning of Martin’s personal journey may deliberately echo those of Prince Hamlet, his ultimate choices are for life and love.

Lest we forget the Oedipal Hamlet, *Two Girls and a Guy* eliminates Polonius and forces the Hamlet-figure to focus on his obsession with “Gertrude,” which may be tied to his passive-aggressive behavior toward “Ophelias.” Blake (Robert Downey, Jr.) is an actor who is confronted by his *two* girlfriends—after ten months of pledging his total love to each of them and weaving lies to keep them apart. James Toback presents a Hamlet-figure who is a theatrical, pretentious, dissembling mamma’s boy. He believes his knowledge of Hamlet’s role establishes his moral fiber, despite the evidence of his life. When the girls accuse him of being a hack, he responds: “Obviously you haven’t seen my Hamlet or you wouldn’t berate me in this fashion. You’d have respect for me. . . . I *am* the Melancholy Dane.” But the girls aren’t buying it: when he proclaims that he understands Hamlet’s anger—Carla (Natasha Gregson Wagner) retorts that what he understands is having a mother who “owns his dick.” This is a Hamlet-figure whose indecision comes not from a moral quandary but from being stuck in his psychosexual development.

Prior to this exchange, Blake displays several qualities often associated with Hamlet: a talent for words; a flair for the theatrical and morbid (faking a suicide to manipulate his girlfriends); the ability to cloak his true self while pretending to be revealing; and an obsessive relationship with his mother. In a pseudo-soliloquy, he converses with himself in the mirror, telling himself that this is his last chance to shape up—and if he can’t, maybe he should really kill himself. However, his heart-to-heart with himself degenerates into narcissism and acting exercises—all antics and no truth. Unlike the Dane’s sincere introspection, Blake appears merely addicted to self-created drama.

At one point, Blake attempts to prove his worth as an actor (and as a man) by performing his Hamlet to the two girls, ironically choosing Hamlet’s speech to Gertrude in her bedchamber: “Ecstasy! My pulse, as yours, doth temperately keep time. . . .” Lou (Heather Graham) surprises Blake by knowing Gertrude’s response: “O Hamlet, thou hast cleft my heart in twain.” It is only after the death

of his mother that Blake has the potential to be emotionally honest and commit to Lou—the girl who proved her worth, like Cher, by knowing *Hamlet*. Similar to *Reality Bites*, *Two Girls and a Guy* implies that Gen-Xers are a spoiled generation, that is avoiding maturity at all costs. It takes the death of a parent for Troy and Blake to become adult men, defined as a capacity to love.

In their appropriations of *Hamlet*, this group of films supports Bristol's assessment that: "local action of Hamlet is intensely focused within the sphere of *family politics*" (224, italics added). To truly come to an understanding of themselves and their lives, they must return home. Like Martin Blank, Willie (Timothy Hutton) in *Beautiful Girls* is prompted to return home by his ten-year high school reunion. In Hamlet-fashion, Willie is agonizing over a decision: to keep his girlfriend and "grow up," he believes he must quit his work as a bar-piano player to become an insurance agent. Instead of actually talking to his girlfriend, he mopes around with his friends—who are no more insightful than Rosencrantz or Guildenstern—and verbally spars with a fourteen-year-old who uses references to both *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*. This fantastical nymph challenges and awakens him with the Bard's dialogue in a way that his father can't, a father who is only a ghost of a man since his wife died.

When Willie is finally mature enough to speak to his girlfriend, she teaches him to be true to himself, to remain a piano player; for as night follows day, it is only then that he can be true to her. Rejecting the perpetual adolescence of his boyhood chums, he learns to respect his own path *and* commits to the girl.

In truth, these Hamlets did not return home to confront their childhoods or their parents; they return home to be confronted with their true selves and to abandon their excuses and hesitations. Unlike the broader Baby-Boomer Hamlets, these films reveal the cruelly destructive potential of aimless self-reflection and delay—favoring instead the courage that it takes to commit to life and love.

### The Active Hamlet

While this previous group of Hamlet-figures might have been focused on self-discovery and romance, other Hamlets took to the road; any move toward self-awareness comes as an indirect result of committing to their quest. In *True Romance*, scripted by the ultra-clever Quentin Tarantino, two isolated characters proclaim that they "knew something was rotten in Denmark," to mark separate moments of insight.

Popular culture is presented as the source of wisdom in this rudderless world. Clarence (Christian Slater), the movie's hero, is a comic-book clerk and action-movie expert. Shortly after using the slanged *Hamlet* phrase, he is advised to kill someone by a dead King: Elvis (if Tarantino hadn't written this, I might dismiss this substitution of Elvis for King Hamlet as a stretch). Throughout the film, Elvis (Val Kilmer)—listed as "The Mentor" in the credits, appearing to Clarence in the bathroom (throne room?)—inspires Clarence to take a stand against the corrupt, inspiring him to break out of his dweebish, comic-bookstore existence in a way



**Figure 1:** In the scene “Advice from The King,” the Mentor (Val Kilmer) urges Clarence to kill a pimp. (1993, 2002 Morgan Creek Productions.) Courtesy of Morgan Creek Productions.

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that his real father (Dennis Hopper), an alcoholic cop who deserted him years ago, never could.

Unlike the hesitant Hamlet, Clarence follows the King’s advice and kills a man, the pimp who had previously defiled his new bride Alabama (Patricia Arquette). Clarence’s quicker action, compared to Hamlet’s hesitation, may be that Clarence has more reason to trust the Mentor’s advice than Hamlet does his father’s ghost: the Mentor actually cares for Clarence, ending each encounter with: “I always liked you, Clarence; I always will.” The Mentor is also concerned about what will happen to Clarence, while the Ghost’s command to Hamlet is only about what is important to the King, and never about what is best for his son. The murder of the pimp is also about fully committing to romance, unlike the proposed murder of Claudius that drives Hamlet away from Ophelia.

In the second use of the slanged quotation, it is L.A. detective Nicky Dimes (Chris Penn) who confidently tells his chief, “I knew something was rotten in Denmark”—presenting Dimes as a second Hamlet-figure. Based on his information, the police set up a sting operation—a “mousetrap” which Dimes runs and of which Clarence is the unsuspecting target (Dimes is impressed by Clarence’s wit and confidence). Though Dimes is proven wiser than his partner by his use of Shakespeare, he lacks Clarence’s deep knowledge of action films and comic books to know how to play the hero successfully. When the sting becomes an out-of-control crossfire—much like the final scene of *Hamlet*—Clarence is wounded

but Dimes is killed, through his blind pursuit of revenge. As a protagonist who knows both Shakespeare and pop culture—and who commits fully to true romance and the actions required to preserve it—Clarence escapes to Mexico with the money and the girl. With its dual, and dueling, Hamlets, this film presents two alternate paths for a contemporary prince, favoring the one that most differs from Shakespeare's original.

Of all these *Hamlet*-influenced films, *Best Men* uses the widest range of *Hamlet* lines and parallels; it is also the film that received the most-limited release. As the men of the title get ready for a wedding, a television news report chronicles the exploits of the serial bank-robber "Hamlet," who recites lines from the play during his hold-ups, giving part of the money to orphanages. However, unlike previous Gen-X Hamlets, Billy (Sean Patrick Flanery) in *Best Men* does not get the girl. Billy has been brought home, to confront his ghosts, by the double occasion of his friend Jesse (Luke Wilson)'s prison-release and wedding, with Billy serving as one of the groomsmen. Selfishly, Billy as "Hamlet" stops to rob his hometown bank before going to the church. Unfortunately, his friends don't wait in the car and the choreographed robbery becomes a hostage situation and a stand off, with Billy's estranged father Bud Phillips (Fred Ward), as the local sheriff called to the scene.

The film is deliberate in eliminating romance as a potential motive for Billy's Hamlet—he has no Ophelia. In explaining his malaise that led him to rob banks, he switches gears and quotes Polonius: "Yet do I believe the origin and commencement of his grief sprung from neglected love." In the context of the original, Polonius was referring to unrequited *romantic* love—and is considered wrong. By taking the quote out of context—in a truly dialogic appropriation—Billy is implying that he, like Hamlet, suffers from the neglected love of his father. A reporter, knowing the plot of *Hamlet*, questions the sheriff about his bankrobber-son: "Does Hamlet's mother have anything to do with this?" In *Best Men*, Billy's mother is the one that haunts her family: dying during childbirth, she has left behind vague memories and a cycle of blame and guilt that separated father and son. Billy's storyline as Hamlet centers specifically around his family issues, an unproductive and ultimately self-destructive mourning.

However, the Claudius-figure moves the plot into the public realm, as FBI agent Hoover (Raymond J. Barry) usurps Sheriff Phillips' management of the hostage situation. To illustrate that he is not the moral equal of Billy, Carter has to read the Cliff Notes of *Hamlet* to keep up. But he does recognize his role in the narrative: "Poison the swords." Hoover confirms that the ultimate authority in this microcosm is morally bankrupt, justifying the outlaw actions of the groomsmen.

Interestingly, Billy is twinned with the potential groom Jesse. The title supports this dual construction: the four friends are "best men" for both Jesse's wedding and for Billy's holdup. Both Billy and Jesse are thieves: Jesse has just been released from prison for his second offense, so his unwitting role in Billy's holdup triggers the "three-strikes-you're-out" rule. Jesse carries all the romantic

urges of Hamlet, while Billy carries all the longing to move out of his father's shadow. While Billy robbed to help fatherless children, Jesse stole a ring to marry Hope (Drew Barrymore). In an intimate conversation between the two friends, Jesse tells Billy that all he ever wanted was to get married and procreate; Billy admits that romance or marriage holds no interest for him. As in *True Romance*, the film explores two different paths for Hamlet.

The film also has multiple Polonius's. Buzz (Dean Cain) is a Laertes-figure, a well-trained fighter who is in mourning for his "dead father;" the military has given him a dishonorable discharge for being gay. Vietnam vet Gonzo (Brad Dourif) proves to be a more legitimate father to Buzz than the military, advising him, like Polonius, to be true to himself—and his sexuality. Gonzo acknowledges him as a valiant soldier despite the military's official disavowal.

The Ophelia-figure, however, Jesse's fiancé, acknowledges another Polonius. Hope, garlanded and dressed in a flowing gown, hysterically breaks into the bank to be with Jesse. While Gonzo's Polonius may be the solicitous father, Sol (Mitchell Whitfield) is Polonius as the well-meaning but fumbling advisor. A high school friend, Sol is also the attorney who lost Jesse's trial, separating Jesse and Hope. It is Hope, not Jesse, who asks Sol to be a part of their wedding. Referred to several times as "counselor," he negotiates a deal with Hoover—and is killed in the crossfire (though not behind the drapes). In his letter read posthumously by his friends, he quotes the other father from *Hamlet*: "Remember me." As a good "daughter," Hope names her son "Sol."

Not only does Gonzo provide Buzz with much-needed support, but he also defines the new logos that governs these characters: "A uniform does not make a soldier. A soldier is someone who is willing to stand up and fight for what he believes in, be it his God, his country or his friends." Friendship between men is the defining value of this film. Teddy (Andy Dick), Buzz and Sol prove themselves as worthy soldiers, with Billy and Jesse as their charismatic captains. Buzz, as the Laertes-figure, joins Billy in the final showdown with Hoover—that claims the lives of all three. However, Jesse escapes with Hope and the money. In a finale strangely identical to the ending of *True Romance*, the outlaw couple plays on a Mexican beach with their infant son.

Though most Gen-X Hamlets follow the narrative path of abandoning pursuit of the father's/Logos' goals in favor of love, by twinning its Hamlet-figure, *True Romance* and *Best Men* portray Hamlet's dual desire for honor and romantic love—demonstrating that one leads to joy while the other leads inevitably to death.

## Conclusion

In defending nineteenth-century parodic appropriations from charges of denigrating Shakespeare, Lawrence Levine suggests "that they may be understood more meaningfully as having *integrated* him into American culture" (23). Likewise, the variety of *Hamlet* references and their rich interweaving with the

narratives of these Gen-X films demonstrates that towards the end of the twentieth-century even young Americans' knowledge of the text is complex—regardless of how they first made the Dane's acquaintance. These parodic Hamlets do not distill the original play's meaning into a sound bite; rather they demonstrate an openness to new explorations of this rich mine. The integrity of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* more than survives these slacker experiments.

Valuing Hamlet in American popular culture has become about valuing the quest, a quest that is about more than "to be," involving instead the desire to be a better man, who can better love. The Gen-X Hamlets are the neglected sons of a vicious father, abandoned to fend for themselves in a corrupt society. Only after confronting their own potential for amorality, fully accepting their responsibility for their actions, are they allowed to truly live. These disenchanting American sons create a new personal order, a new set of values that offers the sense of self and integrity that they can believe in and follow. These Hamlets come to realize what a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties—recognizing their individual potential instead of accepting the limitations imposed by society.

### Note

1. All film dialogue and lyric quotations are from author's notes.

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