Two well-known remarks of Maynard Mack might provide a context for Professor Aldus's study of Hamlet. Acknowledging the exceptionally broad range of opinion about Hamlet, Mack observes that "anyone who tries to throw light on part of the play usually throws the rest into deeper shadow." For Aldus, the diagnosis implies the cure. The basic problem is the critical assumption that Hamlet is "a literal statement about normally definable people in a normally identifiable situation, as though the play were an imagined history" (13). "Literalist" critics seek answers in the light; they should instead more carefully examine the shadows. For Mack, Hamlet's "peculiar hold on everyone's imagination, its almost mythic status, one might say [is] as a paradigm of the life of man." Aldus eliminates the qualifiers: "what we must look for is a Hamlet which is, and which is the result of, 'a vision, a way of looking at the phenomena of existence, a controlling and unifying metaphor on the grandest scale' [H. Weisinger] that embodies a heritage of literary myths" (20).

A mythic approach to Hamlet is, of course, not new. Aldus's contribution is a rigorously thorough and literary mythic approach, based on the attempt to reconcile Aristotle and Plato which obliquely provides his subtitle. From Aristotle, Aldus derives his notion of structure, the central tenet of which is that "the end is everywhere the chief thing" (29). His sense of meaning is developed from Plato's concept (in the Phaedrus) of "invention," the "expression of truth beyond rational statement" (i.e. myth) through "a conscious capacity to design and express metaphor or complexly ordered metaphors in a larger metaphorical form resembling allegory" (22) (i.e. literary myth). The result, I suspect, would please neither Aristotle nor Plato, but provides Aldus with a useful method for explaining a number of difficult critical issues in Hamlet.

Using central patterns of metaphor such as "tellers, " killers," and "players," Aldus points out, with exceptional thoroughness, two familiar problems: that there are surprising parallels between most (if not all) of the characters, and that the play contains a remarkable number of loose ends. Literalist critics (Eliot is their spokesman) consider such problems insoluble: Aldus seeks answers in "the principle of organic context as the ancients found it in tragic myth, and proposed it for the seminal inventive act peculiar to the poet" (223).

Though the results are difficult to summarize, two hypotheses loom largest, that there is finally one, and only one, large cyclical story or mythic pattern presented repeatedly in various concrete manifestations throughout the play, and that, similarly, there is but one character (in Aldus's Aristotelian sense), Hamlet, all others being isolated aspects of or adjuncts to that character. For at the heart of Hamlet is the mystery of universal man, "an agonizing attempt to show that which finally cannot be uncovered however many times and in however many ways there may be attempts to show it." Tragic myth, the class of literary myth which includes Hamlet, takes its significance, for Aldus, from its "quest for self-discovery in the most profound sense of that term, the final discovery that self and what controls it to its own agony remain mystery, riddle, enigma" (83).

Since each character except Hamlet represents clearly defined aspects of Man, each is internally consistent; troubling inconsistencies appear only when one attempts to piece together the whole, for Aldus always greater than the sum of its parts.
The full complexity of Man is seen most clearly in Hamlet’s soliloquies, which bring together “all the contradictory, conflicting elements in man, always in respect to an act profoundly divisive and chaotic in society and in nature, an act twofold but nevertheless indivisibly one in myth and ritual: the killing of the fertility-god-surrogate, priest or father, to supplant him with the fecund mother/woman, and this, in ancient ritual, celebrated annually by ‘a seal’d compact’” (117).

Aldus’s argument is a cumulative one; such a summary fails to do justice to the scrupulous examination of the text of Hamlet, the source, finally, of the persuasive power of Mousetrap. His observations and interpretations are sufficiently fresh and suggestive (though occasionally overly ingenious) to recommend his study even to readers without sympathy for his larger enterprise. Two complaints, however, must be registered, one with the author, the other with his publisher: Aldus cites almost none of the critical literature of the past twenty years, thus ignoring the critical context of his endeavor. And while what is within the cover of Aldus’s book is pleasing enough to the eye, the choice of a printed cloth case over a plain case with dust jacket detracts significantly from that pleasure — despite Virgil Burnett’s striking illustration.

BRIAN CORMAN, University of Toronto


The aim of John Reibetanz’s book, The Lear World, sounds entirely worthy if not novel; he believes, like Bradley and many others, that King Lear is in many ways strikingly different from Shakespeare’s other tragedies, and that an approach to it by way of contemporary plays, especially through the forms and modes of Jacobean rather than Elizabethan drama, will provide, in the cliché that Professor Reibetanz uses quite straightforwardly, “a deeper, more meaningful dramatic experience.” His main concentration is on structure, in particular the use of what he calls “the strong scene” as a discrete entity, and on characterisation; he is interested in the play only in relation to other drama, and not in the context of contemporary non-dramatic sources such as Sidney’s Arcadia, Florio’s translation of Montaigne’s Essais, or Samuel Harsnett’s pamphlet A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures, or in relation to current religious and social thought, or to popular attitudes towards social institutions and society’s outcasts, which seems to me a pity. After all, the explanation he seems to be seeking for the fact that the play has gained “a renewed strength of life in our own time” surely lies as much in some affinity between our own social and religious attitudes and those of the early seventeenth century as in “the nature of our modern dramatic traditions and critical emphases.” Although Professor Reibetanz writes, often rather unconvincingly, of what “we as spectators” experience at a performance of King Lear (as, for instance, that we are called upon to “act out that compassion stressed so many times in the play,” that we “share directly in Lear’s condition and outlook,” and that we see much of the later part of the play through Edgar’s eyes), it seems to me that his method of finding similarities with and analogies for techniques in King Lear in often unexpected Jacobean plays like Middleton’s The Phoenix and A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, Jonson’s Epicoene