One particularly influential generic approach has stressed the grotesqueness or absurdity of the play's comic effects. The ghoulish horrors of the Jacobean stage often seem to hover on the edge of the ludicrous, but G. Wilson Knight (1930; excerpted in Kermode, 1969, and Muir, 1984) found a grotesque comedy throughout King Lear, beginning in the opening scene, in which Lear's anger is foolish and pathetic—absurd as well as frightening. The Fool's role, Knight says, reminds us of 'the humour of cruelty and the cruelty of humour' (p. 124 in Kermode), and the scenes on the heath are mad, fantastical and sinister in an almost hysterical way: 'In no tragedy of Shakespeare does incident and dialogue so recklessly and miraculously walk the tightrope of our pity over the depths of bathos and absurdity' (p. 127). The climax comes in iv.vi with the bathos of Gloucester's failure to commit suicide and the grotesque and ludicrous encounter between Lear and Gloucester.

While brilliantly pointing up the absurd comedy of the play, Knight's reading was not a totally negative one. Although the suffering of Lear and Gloucester is intensified by the grotesque treatment, it is not in the end meaningless. But, when Jan Kott revived and updated Knight's approach by writing of King Lear as a play akin to Beckett's Endgame (Kott, 1965; excerpted in Kermode, 1969), this positive side had vanished. For Kott, Lear, like the Absurd drama of Ionesco and Dürrenmatt as well as Beckett, depicts a world in which existence itself is absurd or grotesque rather than tragic. Gloucester's suicide attempt is no more than a theatrical trick, a pantomime on an empty stage: there are no longer any gods, so such a gesture can have no meaning. It is appropriate, in this reading, that the King himself takes over the clown's role after the Fool disappears.

Historical and social approaches

The events of King Lear ostensibly take place in a remote period of British history, though the Fool is allowed to joke about this when he announces 'This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time' [iii.ii.95–6]. On the other hand, a number of references in the play seem to imply a
very different sort of context: people talk about bourgeois professionals such as lawyers, surgeons, apothecaries, moneylenders, monopoly-holders, politicians and schoolmasters. The characters are clearly not dressed in primitive furs or rags, since they refer to breeches, worsted stockings, gloves, buttons, cod-pieces and spectacles. As we shall see in the section on ‘Approaches to staging and performance’, attempts to give the play a consistently primitive setting have proved problematic, though at the same time it is clear that Shakespeare made some specific efforts to distinguish the manners, beliefs and social institutions of his characters from those of himself and his audience.

That audience would not have been particularly surprised to see legendary British history dramatised on the contemporary stage. Apart from the earlier Leir play itself, a number of previous plays, including Gorboduc, Locrine, The Birth of Merlin and The Misfortunes of Arthur, had been set in a comparably vague and internally inconsistent Ancient Britain. The more serious plays of this type had used their material in the same way as the Elizabethans customarily used more recent historical material – as a body of narratives that could be drawn upon for didactic purposes. They purported to teach political lessons and to provide graphic examples of how monarchs and their subjects ought (or more often ought not) to behave. This was one obvious way of making ancient history relevant to the audience, but critics have argued that King Lear is specifically ‘Jacobean’ in a number of other ways as well.

The topical and the prophetic

In the most immediate sense, it has been claimed that the Lear story would have had a topical relevance in the early seventeenth century because of the parallel case of one Brian Annesley, an old servant of Queen Elizabeth, whose daughter Grace attempted in October 1603 to have him declared lunatic and unfit to govern his affairs. His youngest daughter Cordell defended him and succeeded in inheriting his property when he died in 1604, although her sister contested the will.