surrounded by slums’ (1970, p. 219), but Emrys Jones has argued that it is entirely appropriate that the last scene should be structured by the irruption of chance and should have a tendency to get lost in the clogging detail which is characteristic of the whole play (1971, p. 192).

The ending is indeed formally eccentric in a number of ways. Susan Snyder points out that, although Lear does not acknowledge his own death, there is a sense in which the death of Cordelia allows him ‘to do the impossible, to experience his own death’ (1984, p. 459), while Carol Marks (1968) notes that the final summing up or eulogy, which normally comes after the major characters have died, is anticipated in, or replaced by Lear’s ‘Upon such sacrifices, my Cordelia, / The gods themselves throw incense’ [v.iii.20–1]. Stephen Booth, in a full and very subtle discussion of the whole problem (1983), sees King Lear as a play which deliberately refuses ordinary forms of closure: it ‘ends but does not stop’ (p. 11). This is a matter not just for the characters but also for the audience, who must likewise ‘cope with the fact that the idea of the ultimate is only an idea’ (p. 12). Booth finds the play a triumph of both endurance or duration and of indefiniteness or ‘indefinition’: it is particularly demanding because the anticipated conclusion is delayed and ultimately withheld.

Approaches to staging and performance

There is a curiously persistent tradition, despite much argument and many productions to the contrary, that King Lear is not an effective play in the theatre. Charles Lamb famously wrote that ‘Lear is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage. . . . To see Lear acted, to see an old man tottering about the stage with a walking-stick, turned out of doors by his daughters in a rainy night, has nothing in it but what is painful and disgusting’ (1812; excerpted in Kermode, 1969, pp. 44–5). A century later A. C. Bradley seemed to agree when he wrote of King Lear as ‘Shakespeare’s greatest achievement . . . but not his best play’ (1904; excerpted in Kermode, 1969, p. 83), and more recently still Margaret Webster, writing as an experienced actress and director,
described it as 'the least actable' of the major tragedies (1957, p. 214).

None of these critics is hostile to the play; rather it is because their estimation of it as a text is so high that they feel no theatrical representation can be adequate. Lamb insisted that 'The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual. . . . On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness.' Bradley found Lear 'too huge for the stage', and Webster said that the actors and the audience are 'strained beyond the limits of the theatre medium'. King Lear should, it is assumed, be a sublime experience, but in reality it is more likely to be tedious or even ridiculous.

**Stage history**

Does the actual stage history of the play support these views? Shakespeare was undoubtedly a practical man of the theatre, actor as well as writer and shareholder, whose expertise we might be prepared to respect, as Harley Granville-Barker, another man of the theatre, argues in his defence of the play against Bradley and others (1946; excerpted in Muir, 1984). Unfortunately, we have no evidence that King Lear was particularly successful in Shakespeare's own time. Records of performances are sparse, though this is not unusual and need not carry much weight. Other indications are, if anything, negative: some of the Folio cuts (for example, Lear's 'trial' of his daughters in iii.vi) may have been made because the audience laughed inappropriately, and The Shakespeare Allusion Book lists very few references to Lear in the works of other writers — even Pericles and The Merry Wives of Windsor, let alone the other tragedies, were mentioned more often (see Hunter, New Penguin Shakespeare edn., 1972, p. 46).

Notoriously, Shakespeare's text was not performed at all for a century and a half after 1681, when Tate's adaptation held the stage. While retaining some long passages of Shakespeare's dialogue, Tate added a love affair between Cordelia and Edgar (who saves her from being abducted and raped by Edmund), omitted the Fool, and, as I have said