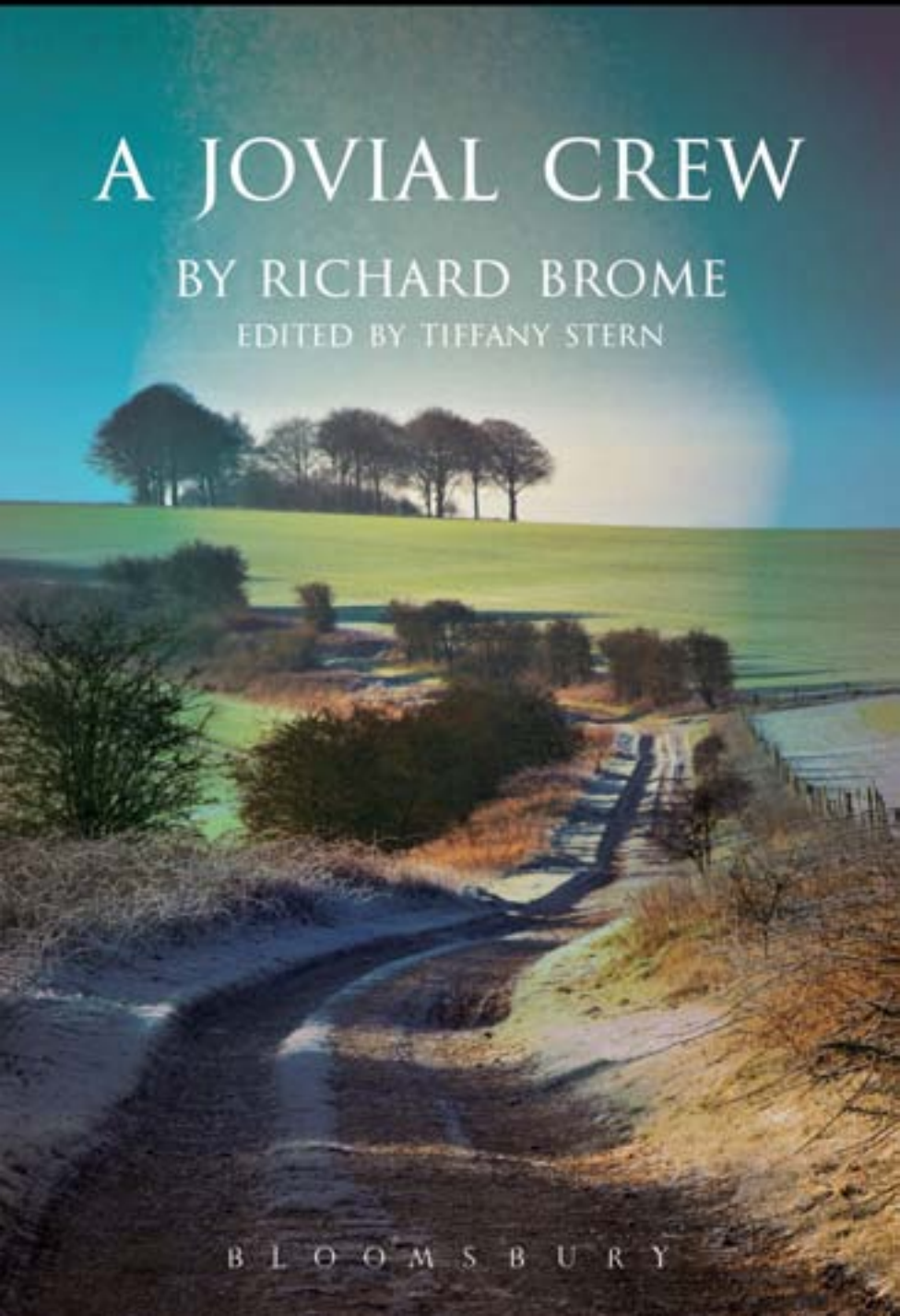
ARDEN EARLY MODERN DRAMA

A JOVIAL CREW

BY RICHARD BROME

EDITED BY TIFFANY STERN



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General Editors: Suzanne Gossett,
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ARDEN EARLY MODERN DRAMA

A JOVIAL CREW, OR THE MERRY BEGGARS

Richard Brome
for Beeston's Boys at the Phoenix

Edited by
TIFFANY STERN

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The Editor

Tiffany Stern is Professor of Early Modern Drama at Oxford University. Her publications include *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (2000), *Making Shakespeare* (2004), *Shakespeare in Parts*, with Simon Palfrey (2007; winner of the 2009 David Bevington Award for Best New Book in Early Drama Studies) and *Documents of Early Modern Performance* (2009; winner of the 2010 David Bevington Award for Best New Book in Early Drama Studies). She has co-edited a collection of essays with Farah Karim-Cooper, *Shakespeare's Theatres and the Effects of Performance* (2013), and has edited the anonymous *King Leir* (2001), Sheridan's *The Rivals* (2004) and Farquhar's *Recruiting Officer* (2010). Tiffany Stern is a General Editor of the New Mermaids series and an Advisory General Editor for the Arden Shakespeare, and is on the editorial boards of the journals *SEDERI*, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *The Hare* and *Shakespeare Quarterly*. She is the author of over forty chapters and articles on sixteenth- to eighteenth-century theatre and is currently writing a book about theatre and fairs.

To Daniel Grimley

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GENERAL EDITORS' PREFACE

Arden Early Modern Drama (AEMD) is an expansion of the acclaimed Arden Shakespeare to include the plays of other dramatists of the early modern period. The series publishes dramatic texts from the early modern period in the established tradition of the Arden Shakespeare, using a similar style of presentation and offering the same depth of information and high standards of scholarship. We define 'early modern drama' broadly, to encompass plays written and performed at any time from the late fifteenth to the late seventeenth century. The attractive and accessible format and well-informed editorial content are designed with particular regard to the needs of students studying literature and drama in the final years of secondary school and in colleges and universities. Texts are presented in modern spelling and punctuation; stage directions are expanded to clarify theatrical requirements and possibilities; and speech prefixes (the markers of identity at the beginning of each new speech) are regularized. Each volume contains illustrations both from the period and from later performance history; a full discussion of the current state of criticism of the play; and information about the textual and performance contexts from which the play first emerged. The goal of the series is to make these wonderful but sometimes neglected plays as intelligible as those of Shakespeare to twenty-first-century readers.

AEMD editors bring a high level of critical engagement and textual sophistication to their work. They provide guidance in assessing critical approaches to their play, developing arguments from the best scholarly work to date and generating new perspectives. A particular focus of an AEMD edition is the play as it was first performed in the theatre. The title-page of each

volume displays the name of the company for which the play was written and the theatre at which it was first staged: in the Introduction the play is discussed as part of a company repertory as well as of an authorial canon. Finally, each edition presents a full scholarly discussion of the base text and other relevant materials as physical and social documents, and the Introduction describes issues arising in the early history of the publication and reception of the text.

Commentary notes, printed immediately below the playtext, offer compact but detailed exposition of the language, historical context and theatrical significance of the play. They explain textual ambiguities and, when an action may be interpreted in different ways, they summarize the arguments. Where appropriate they point the reader to fuller discussions in the Introduction.

CONVENTIONS

AEMD editions always include illustrations of pages from the early texts on which they are based. Comparison between these illustrations and the edited text immediately enables the reader to see clearly what a critical edition is and does. In summary, the main changes to the base text – that is, the early text, most often a quarto, that serves as the copy from which the editor works – are these: certain and probable errors in the base text are corrected; typography and spelling are brought into line with current usage; and speech prefixes and stage directions are modified to assist the reader in imagining the play in performance.

Significant changes introduced by editors are recorded in the textual notes at the foot of the page. These are an important cache of information, presented in as compact a form as is possible without forfeiting intelligibility. The standard form can be seen in the following example:

31 doing of] *Coxeter;* of doing *Q;* doing *Rawl*

The line reference ('31') and the reading quoted from the present editor's text ('doing of') are printed before the closing square bracket. After the bracket, the source of the reading, often the name of the editor who first made the change to the base text ('*Coxeter*'), appears, and then other readings are given, followed by their source ('of doing *Q;* doing *Rawl*'). Where there is more than one alternative reading, they are listed in chronological order; hence in the example the base text Q (= Quarto) is given first. Abbreviations used to identify early texts and later editions are listed in the Abbreviations and References section towards the end of the volume. Editorial emendations to the text are discussed in the main commentary, where notes on emendations are highlighted with an asterisk.

Emendation necessarily takes account of early texts other than the base text, as well as of the editorial tradition. The amount of attention paid to other texts depends on the editor's assessment of their origin and importance. Emendation aims to correct errors while respecting the integrity of different versions as they might have emerged through revision and adaptation.

Modernization of spelling and punctuation in AEMD texts is thorough, avoiding the kind of partial modernization that produces language from no known period of English. Generally modernization is routine, involving thousands of alterations of letters. As original grammar is preserved in AEMD editions, most modernizations are as trivial as altering 'booke' to 'book', and are unworthy of record. But where the modernization is unexpected or ambiguous the change is noted in the textual notes, using the following format:

102 trolls] *(*trowles*)*

Speech prefixes are sometimes idiosyncratic and variable in the base texts, and almost always abbreviated. AEMD editions expand contractions, avoiding confusion of names that might be similarly abbreviated, such as Alonzo/Alsemero/Alibius

from *The Changeling*. Preference is given to the verbal form that prevails in the base text, even if it identifies the role by type, such as 'Lady' or 'Clown', rather than by personal name. When an effect of standardization is to repress significant variations in the way that a role is conceptualized (in *Philaster*, for example, one text refers to a cross-dressed page as *Boy*, while another uses the character's assumed name), the issue is discussed in the Introduction.

Stage directions in early modern texts are often inconsistent, incomplete or unclear. They are preserved in the edition as far as is possible, but are expanded where necessary to ensure that the dramatic action is coherent and self-consistent. Square brackets are used to indicate editorial additions to stage directions. Directions that lend themselves to multiple staging possibilities, as well as the performance tradition of particular moments, may be discussed in the commentary.

Verse lineation sometimes goes astray in early modern play-texts, as does the distinction between verse and prose, especially where a wide manuscript layout has been transferred to the narrower measure of a printed page. AEMD editions correct such mistakes. Where a verse line is shared between more than one speaker, this series follows the usual modern practice of indenting the second and subsequent part-lines to make it clear that they belong to the same verse line.

The textual notes allow the reader to keep track of all these interventions. The notes use variations on the basic format described above to reflect the changes. In notes, '31 SD' indicates a stage direction in or immediately after line 31. Where there is more than one stage direction, they are identified as, for example, '31 SD1', '31 SD2'. The second line of a stage direction will be identified as, for instance, '31.2'. A forward slash / indicates a line-break in verse.

We hope that these conventions make as clear as possible the editor's engagement with and interventions in the text: our aim is to keep the reader fully informed of the editor's role

without intruding unnecessarily on the flow of reading. Equally, we hope – since one of our aims is to encourage the performance of more plays from the early modern period beyond the Shakespeare canon – to provide texts which materially assist performers, as well as readers, of these plays.

PREFACE

This work would not have been possible without Ann Haaker's edition of the play for the venerable Regents Renaissance Drama series (1968) and R. G. Lawrence's good (if hasty) text for his collection of *Jacobean and Caroline Comedies* (1973). It has also benefited a great deal from the excellent *Richard Brome Online* site, which includes an edition of *A Jovial Crew* by Eleanor Lowe (Original Text), Helen Ostovich (Modern Text) and Richard Cave (General). Insights from all three editions have informed this text.

Having the opportunity to edit for Arden Early Modern Drama's wonderful general editors, Suzanne Gossett, John Jowett and Gordon McMullan, has been a delight. Warm friends and great editors, they were unstinting in their advice, and, as I worked on *A Jovial Crew*, revealed layers that helped me to look again at what I thought I knew. They also let me choose which play to edit in the first place. I am grateful to have been allowed to work on the poignant end-point of AEMD: the last play to be put on before the closure of the theatres for the interregnum.

My particular thanks go to my general editor, Suzanne Gossett, whose support and guidance were invaluable. Her encouragement, and her close scrutiny of the text and notes, improved the text; her friendship and good advice – about jovial crews in life as well as in literature – made the process of editing a real pleasure. To Jane Armstrong, I am profoundly grateful. A formidable and wonderful copy editor, her thoroughness and critical eye have made this a better book. Emily Hockley, Arden's editorial assistant, was extremely helpful with images. Margaret Bartley, Arden's publisher, has been a dear friend as well as a supportive publisher, and I owe her a debt of thanks for her wise and seasoned guidance throughout the preparation of this book.

I could not have completed my work without the assistance of librarians across the country. My grateful thanks to the staff of the following libraries: the British Library, the Bodleian Library, the Cambridge University Library, the Leeds University Library, the National Library of Scotland, the Royal Shakespeare Company Archives, the Shakespeare Institute Library and the Victoria and Albert Museum Library.

Being part of a real jovial crew, 'Team English' at Univ, has been an inspiration. Thank you, Nicholas Halmi, Laura Varnam and, latterly, Christopher Salamone, for your collegiality and friendship.

Daniel Grimley inspired the musical appendix to this book, and helped me write it. *A Jovial Crew* is, with love, dedicated to him.

Tiffany Stern
University College, Oxford

INTRODUCTION

Richard Brome, as he dedicates *A Jovial Crew, or The Merry Beggars* (hereafter *A Jovial Crew*) to Thomas Stanley, claims that his play had what he calls 'the luck' to 'tumble last of all in the epidemical ruin of the scene': it was the last play staged before the theatres closed in 1642 as the English Civil War began. Brome's mixed metaphors conflate the problems faced by his play and his country: it 'tumble[s]' (loses footing) into the 'epidemical' (loses health) 'ruin' (loses building) of the 'scene' (the back wall of the stage, but also the story of England conceived of as a play). But this dedication, written not when *A Jovial Crew* was performed at the Cockpit/Phoenix in 1641 or 1642, but when it was printed in 1652, gives the text a 'certain poignancy which it would not originally have possessed' (Butler, *Theatre*, 269; see pp. 49–50).

Tension between the text of around 1640 and the preliminary matter of 1652 explains not just the conflict within the play itself, but also the conflicting attitudes with which it has been judged. So the play has been said to be using escapism to counter the troubles of the times (Andrews; Haaker; Kaufmann) and, alternatively, to be a parody of the theme of escapism (Butler, *Theatre*). It has been seen as a nostalgia piece about the Elizabethan period (Lawrence) and the reverse: a frankly realistic appraisal of contemporary Caroline troubles (Butler, *Theatre*; Gaby). The 'begging progress' made by the gentrified protagonists has been described as an escape from society's rules (Sullivan), or, conversely, as a reflection of the King's northern progress in 1641–2 to rally troops (Steggle, 'Redating'). The 'beggars' commonwealth' has thus been seen as an acknowledgement that beggars too create hierarchies (Carroll) or, alternatively, as a recognition that society can structure itself without enforced leadership (Gaby). As a result, the play has been judged to be radical (Butler, *Theatre*; Sanders, *Caroline*)

or Cavalier (Farley-Hills), and the happy ending is thus said to be genuinely happy (Ingram; Haaker), ironically happy (Farley-Hills; Clark) or disturbingly troubled (Sanders, *Caroline*; Steggle, *Brome*). This introduction will try to mediate between these attitudes while illustrating how carefully, both in 1641/2 and in 1652, Brome steers his drama between opposites. *A Jovial Crew*, with its aim of cheering up a troubled country, also maintains that that can only be achieved – if at all – in the world of fiction.

Put on at the conventional terminus of early modern drama, *A Jovial Crew* is a work whose theatrical position is as fascinating as its political one. Brome used his play to attack contemporary romantic drama, while upholding the themes and concerns of Jacobean and Elizabethan writers – he was in some ways an old-fashioned playwright, and his style was connected to that of his mentor, Ben Jonson. Nevertheless, *A Jovial Crew*'s simple humour and accessible style were also forward-looking. The play would become one of the first dramas mounted after the interregnum, perhaps even shaping what Restoration comedies were to become. Popular thereafter too, *A Jovial Crew* would later, in the eighteenth century, be adapted into an opera. It only ceased to be performed when John Gay's *Beggar's Opera*, designed to rival or complement it, took over. *A Jovial Crew*, then, says as much about the history of theatre as it does about the history of England.

THE PLAY

Mood and title

For many years *A Jovial Crew* was famous simply for its good humour. Its story is, after all, a happy one. Though Oldrents has been given a terrible prophecy – that his children will become beggars – he responds with kindness, giving shelter and money to visiting vagrants. When his daughters, Rachel and Meriel, do

end up as beggars, it is through choice: they join the beggar community in search of adventure. Their faithful lovers, Vincent and Hilliard, follow them, as does the charismatic and mysterious Springlove, steward to Oldrents, but also, it emerges, king of the beggars. The play is, then, in structure, a genial pastoral comedy about a crisis averted. Immediately accepted into the beggar community, the young gentry find themselves in a life of drink, song and, surprisingly, hardship. Oldrents, meanwhile, learning that his children are indeed beggars, seeks happiness through drink and song of his own, encouraged by his friend Hearty. As a result, the middle of *A Jovial Crew* consists of drunken singing. At the play's conclusion, children and father are reunited. The gentry, chastened by their beggar experiences, agree to return to their noble life, and marry their lovers. Springlove, too, arranges to marry – during the beggars' sojourn he has met and fallen in love with Amy as she attempted to escape from two other less desirable fiancés. The play thus has a typical 'comedy' ending with multiple prospective weddings. It also concludes with some telling disclosures. The beggars have a 'priest', called 'the Patrico' in cant, who reveals that Oldrents had, in his youth, dallied with a beggar-woman who bore him a son: that son, explains the Patrico, is Springlove. The Patrico also reveals that he is himself from a noble family brought to ruin by Oldrents' ancestors. Patrico, then, is all noble blood and also all beggar, while Springlove's blood unites beggars and gentry. 'Here are no beggars', concludes Oldrents, raising questions about what 'beggar' even means, '. . . but a select company to fill this house with mirth' (5.1.529–31). Through the temporary beggardom of Oldrents' children, the events of the past have been revealed and assuaged. Oldrents and his children, including his newfound son Springlove, prepare to return to their old lives with new knowledge: the remaining beggars are given a 'free pass' to go on their way unpunished.

The play, wrote A. C. Swinburne, is a composition of 'quaint, extravagant, and consistent characters' who collectively produce

'harmony of dramatic evolution and vivacity of theatrical event' (507). A century later G. E. Bentley thought the play a 'gay and captivating comedy' (3.71), and Thomas Marc Parrott and Robert Hamilton Ball maintained that 'a fresh breath of country air blows through the playhouse while the story of good squire Oldrents and his merry daughters is unrolled' (Parrott and Ball, 178). As recently as 1992, John Peter, commenting on the Royal Shakespeare Company production of the play, concluded, 'Brome is a shrewd observer . . . determined not to give offence to anyone. The beggars are good-natured and colourful; the gentry mostly jovial and generous; the two girls tease and simper pleasantly, with a touch of the naughties' (*Sunday Times*, 26 April 1992).

Detractors have likewise focused on the play's mood. In the eighteenth century, *A Jovial Crew*, in its revised form, was said by one newspaper to be an 'incongruous . . . mixture of mirth, absurdity, and low humour' (*Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, 10 February 1777); the play's popularity was traced to its ability to amuse the unthinking. 'I cannot', wrote David Erskine Baker, 'help looking on the great Approbation it met with as a Kind of Reflection on the public Taste' (*Companion*, 1, sig. K6^{r}); later he repeated Theophilus Cibber's sentiment that 'Brome's applauses' conferred 'no great honour' on his admirers (Baker, *Biographia*, 1.119). A. W. Ward based his opprobrium on the play's merriment: 'The scenes illustrating the title of the play contain little that to a modern reader will be otherwise than repulsive' (3.127).

Both sets of critics are responding to the fact that *A Jovial Crew* is a 'feel-good' play. It is filled with puns, jokes and songs. Its characters are happy from name onwards: Meriel has 'merry' in her name and believes 'We cannot live but by laughing' (2.1.74); Springlove loves spring, springs out of love, and falls in love in springtime; Hearty's name speaks for itself – with his hearty singing and drinking he is a locus for the play's good humour. As well as happy in its characterization,

the play is positive about humanity generally. Many of its characters are decent at root – the servant Randall seeks help in order to resist the temptation to steal the money that has been left in his care, for instance. Others are benevolent – Oldrents responds to the sins of his past by giving plentifully to the beggars, and reacts to the disappearance of his children by absolving his tenants of all rent and doubling his servants' wages. Even the broad plot structure of the play is positive, forever hinting at a happy solution to come: Oldrents first mentions his children together with Springlove (1.1.103–4); Oldrents' friend Hearty, later, feels Springlove and Oldrents are connected (2.2.53–4); Oldrents sees in the beggar-priest Patrico 'more soul than a born beggar' (2.2.316–17). At the conclusion there is no retribution, and the villains turn out to have been less bad than feared. Justice Clack, to whom the beggars have been sent for punishment, gives the beggars a free pass instead of a whipping; Oliver, Clack's son, hitherto a ne'er-do-well without an emotional core, apologizes to the women he attempted to purchase and rape – 'I hope we all are friends' (5.1.559). Oliver's depiction, in particular, reminds us how even great sins can be amended, for he is now what Oldrents once was. Oldrents, we learn, had, as the text puts it, 'assaulted' a beggar-woman 'With amorous, though loose, desires' (5.1.474–5). He had then left his lover when she had had his son, tossing her some money and, by mistake, a relic. That is why, in the play, he is struck with guilt by beggars in general, and why he is sickened when offered a doxy: 'A sudden qualm overchills my stomach' (2.2.297). Oldrents, however, has subsequently lived his life making amends for his past wrongs; in the play, he is finally forgiven them. He is the good man that Oliver can become: even the most serious suffering detailed in the play is utterly reformable.

Yet looked at closely, the play is ambiguous. Its mood and tone are not quite the same as its content. Though Brome once boasted that he never 'spilt Ink' outside comedies 'Which in the

thronged Theatres did appear / All Mirth and Laughter' ('To . . . Hastings, Deceased', 74), not all comedies are light-hearted. *A Jovial Crew*, which is insistently happy in feel, wrestles with some dark issues.

'Jovial', the first word of the title, and a theme of the play throughout, is a loaded adjective. It derives from Jove, or Jupiter, king of the classical gods and god of joy – and thunder. 'Jovial', then, might equally signify 'happy' or 'turbulent and ungovernable'. The early modern phrase 'jovial crew', reflecting this dichotomy, teetered between pleasure and threat: it was regularly used, ironically, to describe a beggar community. Brome was highly conscious of the nuances of the phrase. He compared his earlier play *The Northern Lass* to a beggar '*Jovially* begot' because, he explained, it 'came out of the cold North, thinly clad' (sig. A2^{r}). *A Jovial Crew*, with its ragged beggars, is about both the wild happiness and the suffering of the beggar community. For Brome, joviality and distress were closely allied.

Furthering this ambiguity was the fact that the phrase 'jovial crew' was also used to describe a group of abandoned drinkers (Steggle, *Brome*, 171–3). So in a drinking song in John Ford's *Lady's Trial*, it is 'a Joviall crew' who can 'drinke till all looke blew' (sig. H1^{v}) – an idea ironically rephrased for *A Jovial Crew*'s 'round' or catch, 'Old sack, and old songs' (see p. 269). Yet the drinkers in *A Jovial Crew* are not presented as actually happy. The beggars 'bowse [drink] in defiance o'th' harman-beck [constable]' (2.2.180); Oldrents drinks because, as he instructs Tallboy, 'sack' will help 'drown . . . suspirations [sighs]' (4.1.280); the grey-beards drink in order that 'sorrow be drowned' (4.1.258); Hearty's instructive song about the 'old fellow at Waltham Cross' concerns a man who opted for 'sack' because he had lost everything else: 'He cheered up his heart when his goods went to wrack, / With a "hem boy, hem" and a cup of old sack' (2.2.100–1). Even Justice Clack, one of the few drinkers who is not depressed, drinks for bad reasons,

wolfing down his own alcohol in order to prevent his guests getting too much of it. The fact that the play is 'jovial' may not, perversely, mean that it is happy.

Brome was, moreover, pointedly choosing 'jovial' to replace his more usual term, 'mirth'. In his *City Wit*, 'nothing but mirth's intended' (sig. G4^{r}); *The Court Beggar* is 'But a slight piece of mirth' (sig. N4^{v}); *The Damoiselle* offers 'familiar mirth' (sig. A2^{r}); *The English Moor* presents 'wit and harmeless mirth' (sig. A2^{r}); *Mad Couple* asks, 'had you Mirth enough?' (sig. H2^{r}); *A Novella* says 'all we pretend to is but Mirth and Sence' (sig. H4^{r}). But *A Jovial Crew*, performed in a troubled age and printed in a yet more troubled one, maintains in its prologue that 'mirth' is a 'forced thing in these . . . days' (Prol.2–3). Haunted by the very sorrow it is intended to dispel, the prologue acknowledges that mirth has gone out of fashion, and ends on the concept of grief: it wishes of the play that 'the dullness may make no man sleep, / Nor sadness of it any woman weep' (21–2). True, the play ultimately claims to have been 'intended for your mirth' (Epil.8) – but it begins after the word 'weep'.

Looked at more closely, many of the seemingly merry characters in *A Jovial Crew* are sad. Oldrents, obsessed with 'jovial mirth' (2.2.114), is in a highly anxious state. He opens the play so doom-laden about calamities that may befall his children that he drives them away: 'our father . . . makes us even sick of his sadness' (2.1.27–9). His daughters join the beggar community, unwittingly fulfilling Oldrents' greatest fears; on learning of their departure, Oldrents opts for 'Forced mirth', hoping that it can be 'by strife and custom . . . made good' (2.2.33–6). After that, he laughs for the same reason that he drinks – in order not to cry: 'jovial mirth . . . I will force out of my spleen so freely / That grief shall lose her name where I have being' (2.2.114–16). His grey-beard friends are the same: though they constitute, as their song has it, a 'merry old crew' (4.1.259), their ditty is an instruction to find happiness

in alcohol when feeling sad or 'blue'. This, of course, raises questions about the beggars, the most determinedly happy group in the play. Are they as delighted with life as they seem? There, too, the play offers alternative and contradictory answers.

Character development and genre

The play's ambiguous characterization, one of its salient features, is nowhere more obvious than in the depiction of the beggars. They seem recklessly happy; their songs, though, hint at sadnesses not mentioned in the dialogue (see p. 256). More troublingly, they have unfixed natures, altering in attitude, language and class during the progress of the drama. First courtly and symbolic, later poverty-stricken and realistic, the beggars may constantly sing and dance, but their dispositions, and hence the meaning of their actions, change over time.

At the start of the play, the beggars are like other early modern theatrical beggars. First described, then heard offstage and only afterwards revealed, they are given a protracted, highly theatrical entrance, recalling the introduction of dancing beggars and gypsies in masques. This connection is furthered by the fact that a curtain has to be drawn in order to 'discover' the beggars in their '*postures*' (1.1.375.3). When they then ask, 'Shall we dance, shall we sing, to welcome our king?', and demand, 'Strike up, piper, a merry, merry dance, / That we on our stampers may foot it and prance' (378–80), they emerge as joyous fictions, whose performances will bring pleasure alike to the stage gentry and to us, the actual spectators. They do, however, offer a commentary upon the gentry. Their barn abuts so closely onto Oldrents' house that the two spaces are separated by a door: Springlove '*opens the scene*' (375.1) from inside Oldrents' house to reveal the beggars' dwelling. Perhaps the two groups are more similar than might have been anticipated.

Key beggars are introduced in a way that continues to highlight their fictional nature. Called 'Soldier', 'Lawyer',

'Scribble' (a poet) and 'Courtier', they are conventional rather than realistic, recalling in name and character the play's older gentry, Oldrents and Hearty. They are also presented as the well-born professionals they once were, reflecting other dramas in which beggars are actually upper class (*King Lear* has as its sole beggar Poor Tom, a disguised member of the gentry, despite its stated concern with 'unaccommodated man' and the plight of the poor – see Haynes, 22). Each beggar is, moreover, in theatrical fashion, 'narrated' into being as his background is supplied by a fellow beggar:

> LAWYER Sir . . . He is a decayed poet, newly fallen in among us, and begs as well as the best of us. He learned it pretty well in his own profession before and can the better practise it in ours now.
> SPRINGLOVE Thou art a wit too, it seems.
> SOLDIER He should have wit and knavery too, sir, for he was an attorney till he was pitched over the bar.
>
> (1.1.390–7)

Though happy and carefree, then, these beggars are 'not on the same representational level' as the younger gentry (Womack, 257). They do, however, share with the gentry the fact that they have given over regular lives for the thrill of vagabondage. Once again, the beggars and the nobility are shown as quintessentially similar.

Over the course of the play, however, who the beggars are, and what they represent, is altered. The social reality of beggar life in early modern England becomes a topic as the courtly lovers find themselves living an authentic rather than a literary beggar life. After a fiercely uncomfortable night sleeping in lice-filled straw, Meriel and Rachel, taken to be real beggar-wenches, are almost raped by Oliver; later, a choice of vagabond women is offered as 'coarse fare' to Oldrents and Hearty (2.2.289–94). As 'real life' beggar events become part of the

drama, lower-class and more 'realistic' beggars are introduced: one is a doxy who is heard '*crying out*' in labour (129.2); a further two are drunken octogenarian beggars who undergo a crude marriage. Both the birth and the marriage involve singing and dancing – but the noise created is a way of hiding the cries of labour and the sexual fumbling of the elderly couple. Thus the music that at the start of the play highlighted and celebrated artifice now serves the purpose of drowning out reality.

The remaining 'real' beggars at the end of the play are given a free pass to wander off again. But since they have moved from performing a dramatic function to performing a documentary one, it is unclear whether this freedom is a good or bad thing. In 'fictional' terms, they can now continue their merry wandering. In 'realistic' terms, however, they are being sent back to their lives of begging, dirt and sexual exploitation. More than that, the play shows that the beggars will now be poorer than ever: without access to the sums of money Oldrents gave them in his grief, and bereft of their 'king' Springlove, the beggars will lack money and a protector. *A Jovial Crew*, *or The Merry Beggars*, a play named after the beggars it features, seems to drop its focus as easily as the gentry do. This may, of course, be because *A Jovial Crew* itself is really about landed gentry, not beggars; the beggar crew, important for as long as they are a repository for the Oldrents family's secrets, cease to be relevant at the play's conclusion. But this may also be a way of, bleakly, completing the beggars' story.

Other protagonists, too, change their natures over the course of the play – in particular, Oldrents' daughters and their lovers, who at first seem to come from a different form of fiction altogether. Their story initially suggests the popular 1630s 'romances / Of lovers' (Prol.8–9) that the prologue bemoaned were in fashion, in which 'afflicted wanderers' (11) go through a series of trials ending in 'some impossibility' (13). In romance fashion, the young gentry have elegant and somewhat contrived names – Meriel, Rachel, Vincent and Hilliard (see List of Roles,

2, 3, 11, 12nn.); in romance fashion, too, the men follow the women into the beggar community to prove their love; and in romance fashion, all expect the beggars to provide a pastoral idyll – Meriel rejects communal celebrations like horse races or Dover's Olympics (see 2.1.94–7) for the greater joy of playing at poverty. Yet the gentry's unthinking belief that their own lives are full of care and responsibility, while beggars are free, is challenged by the 'reality' they confront. When the lovers all confess to being disillusioned by actual beggar life, they query their own romantic natures: beggar life is meaner and tougher than literature had suggested.

The older generation also changes character, though not in quite the same way. Both Hearty and Oldrents are ambiguous throughout. Hearty, for all his merriment, displays a strangely knowing attitude to the world: the analogies he draws at the beginning of the play are with thieving lawyers, religious hypocrites and medical quacks. A man with no apparent obligations, financial or moral, Hearty can be seen as a comforter, curing Oldrents' unhappiness with his joy, or as a corrupter, battening on Oldrents' unhappiness to finance his own merriment – or does he flit between the two? Even Hearty's 'meaningful' name, which indicates that he is 'great hearted', may equally mean 'full of heart', or 'unrestrained'. The same ambiguities haunt Oldrents, whose character is sometimes at the extreme of sadness and sometimes happy. His name, too, bears a number of readings (see List of Roles, 1n.). At first, 'Oldrents' seems to suggest a reliance, as a member of the landed gentry, on rent for income; but when the man's generosity is revealed, 'Oldrents' comes to seem a description of the reasonable rents (rents charged at the 'old' rather than new price) that he offers his tenants. But then again, when it becomes clear that his current household has been 'rent' or torn by a promise that his children will end up as beggars – or, rather, as Hearty suggests in a joke, with 'old rents' (1.1.96) in their clothes – his name comes to point towards his fears. His actions and his worries are

competing aspects of his personality, as his changeable mood makes clear.

Linking the two groups, beggars and gentry, are Springlove and the Patrico. They, like the beggars, change class – only theirs is an upward trajectory. Springlove starts as, seemingly, another character from a 1630s dramatic romance: he is a servant and a king of beggars – but he has an innate nobility that shines through; by the play's conclusion, he has accepted a life amongst the gentry. Confusingly, he then returns to the trade of beggar in the epilogue, making the 'moral' with respect to him hard to draw. He compares tellingly with the Patrico, who also seems at first a romance-style character. The Patrico appears, Prospero-like, to shape the events of the drama: he 'predicts' to Oldrents the disaster that causes his melancholy; and he reveals the 'Agnus Dei' that brings about the play's solution. It is he who halts the play within the play, moreover, when the time comes to disclose Oldrents' history. Yet at the conclusion of *A Jovial Crew*, the Patrico, the only beggar (apart from his wife) whose name even comes from the beggars' language, cant, is shown to be a man of noble blood as well. Unlike Springlove, however, he is not assumed into the gentry, and does not even receive back the money of which his family was defrauded. Instead, he accepts a 'competent annuity' (5.1.546), and promises to pray forever for the man whose family ruined his own (547–8). His final actions question the relative worth of the beggar and the noble life. The Patrico may have planned the events that the play relates, but he oddly neglected to reinstate himself as part of the resolution.

In reversing the characterization of Springlove and the Patrico at the end of the play, making Hearty and Oldrents ambiguous and thrusting the courtly lovers, Rachel, Meriel, Hillier and Vincent, into an idealistic, romantic pastoral world only to show that it is not ideal at all, Brome seems to be self-consciously reinterpreting saccharine 1630s romantic dramas. When he stages scenic tableaux, singing and dancing

– everything that might be desired in court romance dramas – but puts it all in the mouths and bodies of increasingly unsanitary and suffering beggars, Brome appears to be creating a non-romance out of the very romance features he is apparently adopting. His characters' instability seems to be an extension of this fact; he is superficially writing one kind of drama, but actually writing its reverse.

Politics

A major question disputed by critics is whether the play is focused on politics, is incidentally political or is avoiding politics altogether. When *A Jovial Crew* was written, around 1640, and first performed, in 1641 or 1642, England was in a very particular state of political turmoil. The King, Charles I, was wildly unpopular, and a faction had formed intent on removing him, by force if necessary, and transforming the country into a republic – the result was to be the English Civil War, the beheading of the King and the establishment of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland and Ireland under the Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell. In 1639, when the play will have been planned or penned, the prelude to the Civil War was taking place. Charles had attempted to impose an Episcopalian system of church government (with bishops) in Scotland; the Scottish, who favoured the Presbyterian Church, had mustered their own army, creating a conflict that became known as the First Bishops' War (1639). *A Jovial Crew*, then, was written as small wars started to break out over Britain, heralding the huge crisis to come. With its conflicts and resolutions, its gentry and its beggars, its kingships and its commonwealths, *A Jovial Crew* is clearly exploring issues of its time. But is it *about* those issues?

Recent critics have maintained that Brome's drama engages politically with the events of the early 1640s through reflecting upon what happens if a group leaves their aristocratic certainty for a beggar 'commonwealth'. The play, which comments upon, warns and rebukes English society, is thus seen to be a

hard-hitting political allegory: its 'alternative kingdom' in the beggar community is analogous to Caroline England (Butler, *Theatre*, 274); its affectionate picture of English landscape and culture shows what is being put under threat by contemporary politics (272, 275). Alternatively, as Charles had dissolved Parliament in 1629 and only summoned another in 1640, the play might be about the eleven-year 'tyranny', which had redistributed bureaucratic responsibility to the provinces and given power and potential to rural communities (Sanders, *Caroline*, 60). If so, Brome adopts 'the pastoral genre' not so much for parodic reasons as for its 'nuanced inflections of the vocabulary and discourse of the countryside and the country's community' (67).

In fact, however, there is only one moment in the play when contemporary politics are obviously addressed – and that may be a 1652 addition to the text (see pp. 49–50). Late in the story, the beggars suggest performing a drama on the subject of 'Utopia' (see 4.2.199). Their title is pointed. Ever since Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), a book about a mythical island somewhat resembling England, the term 'Utopia' had been used for discussing what was good and bad about a country ('utopia' signifies equally 'good place' and 'no place'). The beggars say their 'Utopia' playlet will concern a land in crisis where law and divinity fail to 'appease' or 'reconcile' anything, where 'the country, the city and the court' vie for superiority, and where the soldiers ultimately 'cudgel them all together' so that everyone is reduced to 'Beggars' Hall' (4.2.228–39). They seem to be indicating that England is destroying itself through war. But their play is not, ultimately, performed. Is that because it is not of a piece with the rest of the text? Or because the real play about England is *A Jovial Crew* itself? For the true politics of the play may reside not in large allegories but in the play's very characterization. The depiction of the beggars may be a rebuke to contemporary society, now so corrupt that a beggar alternative is preferable (Bevan, 456). Alternatively, the beggars

show how respected professionals are being reduced to beggary in Caroline England (Goodman, 239).

On the other hand, there are those who say that *A Jovial Crew* is not about politics, but is – like its avoidance of mounting 'Utopia' – side-stepping them. William C. Carroll thinks that the play dictates what government attitude ought to be not through story, but through its illustration of goodwill (211). David Farley-Hills sees the play as an escapist romantic drama. After all, actual, literal escape is a serious possibility in *A Jovial Crew*: Springlove escapes from the servitude of being a steward; Rachel and Meriel join him and escape from their unhappy household; Amy escapes from a marriage she does not want (Farley-Hills, 155). If so, then the joy of the play can be located in the promise that every trial can likewise be overcome. Maybe Brome is trying to cheer up a nation at an unhappy point in its history, or even revealing his political affiliations – the Royalist community, the Cavaliers, were laughing to keep up morale and in defiance of the government; possibly Cavalier values, if not political ideas, are reflected by this drama (153).

The problem is that Brome's actual political affiliations are hard to guage, and can only be guessed from the play itself, as his views are otherwise unknown. It is possible to argue that the play is not an escapist drama but a despairing, ironic parody of the very idea of escapism. Brome's *Lovesick Court* parodies tragicomedies, and his *Antipodes* parodies satire; *A Jovial Crew*, which declares its intention to tell unlikely stories (Prol.13–15), could likewise be seen as thoroughly parodic: it would be odd for Brome, who had spent his life writing plays that satirized escapist drama, to turn to such fantasy without simultaneously critiquing it (Shaw, 118, 129). Possibly, then, the play is about the impossibility of escapism, in which case it still addresses contemporary events through mood – but through a sad mood rather than a happy one.

Yet some aspects of the play seem not to be about politics but about social reality. The breaking up of bands of feudal

retainers and the dissolution of the monasteries had led to an influx of beggars in rural England, and perhaps these issues are as germane to *A Jovial Crew*'s story as the events of the late 1630s (Chiang, 120). Indeed, sometimes the play has been said to be simply literal. For instance, beggars plagued the barns of Hertfordshire in 1641, and one landlord, Richard Haynes, got into legal trouble for sheltering them. Though Haynes's legal troubles date from 1641, when the play was probably already in performance, he had committed a similar offence in 1636 (Cressy, *England*, 354). If this is Brome's source, then he is finding value in a lightly fictionalized 'true' story about kindness in times of despair. Alternatively, his 'real' interests may be related to a potential source of much-needed money from patronage. It has been suggested that a 'real' location for Oldrents' house exists in Maplebeck, Nottinghamshire (Sanders, 'Commonwealths', 5), in which case *A Jovial Crew* might additionally be a homage from Brome to a famous Nottinghamshire family, the Cavendishes (Steggle, *Brome*, 166).

Michel Bitot, however, suggests that Brome responds to current affairs theatrically rather than politically; he describes Brome's interest in freedom as descending from a desire for freedom of the stage rather than – or before – the freedom of the nation.

Themes

In his dedicatory poem to *A Jovial Crew* (pp. 76–7), John Hall called the play one of a series of 'instructive recreations' (1), yet, as has been discussed, quite what it instructs or teaches is unclear, because Brome's politics are less obvious than his concerns and values. Just as the play's characters are inconsistent, so the play itself seems to promote simultaneous contradictory beliefs – perhaps because it finds it hard to commit to anything in an unstable world.

Marriage, for instance, is promoted by the drama, yet undercut by it too. Oldrents enjoins the lovers, 'Be one