I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.

Peter Brook, *Empty Space*¹

In the last chapter we discussed the historical, social, and literary context in which the literati’s self expressions became intertwined with their interest in *xi*. *Xi* connoted a wide range of meanings—the playful, the theatrical, and the ephemeral—in drama criticisms, *yongju shi*, and other literary discourses. Illustrators of this period embraced a similar ‘stage’ consciousness by producing images that not only embedded theatrical events, but also underscored reflexively the ‘perceptual dynamics’ of the viewer/viewed relationship.² In the illustrations we see an explicit representation of the broadened concept of *xi* as structured upon the perceptual dynamics of the viewer/viewed relationship.

Illustrations are important as a visual context for the study of the theatrical novel. Book illustration experienced rapid development in late imperial China reaching its apogee during the Wanli era (1573–1620).³ As a result, most publishers in the late Ming included illustrations in their fiction and drama editions. For late imperial readers, the images conditioned the reception of the text because the pictures were located at the top of the page or at the beginning of a chapter.⁴ Those

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⁴ There were three different formats for fiction and drama illustrations, *shangtu/xiawen* 上圖/下文 (illustration above/text below), *chatu* 插圖 (inserted illustration), and *guantu* 冠圖 (capping illustrations). Hegel, *Reading Illustrated Fiction*, pp. 168–213.
images highlight certain crucial scenes of the text and help guide the reader’s visualizations.5

Images not only initiated the reception process for late imperial readers, but also portrayed ‘the moment’s story’ thus elucidating how the text should be interpreted spatially. The spatiality incorporated into the images thereby provides the visual structuring of how theatrical space in late imperial fiction is presented.6 That is, the spatiality inherent to illustrations clearly and directly presents to us a broadened conception of theatricality based on structure. That structure—the viewer/viewed relationship—constituted an important ‘compositional dynamic’ leading to an implied theatricality as the result of the perceptive interaction between the two types of characters.

To complete the discussion of xi as structured upon of the viewed-viewing relationship, the second part of this chapter examines a one-act variety play, “Kuang gushi Yuyang sannong” (The crazy drummer beating to the tune “Yuyang sannong”; hereafter “Kuang gushi”) by Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593), to explain how the relationship enacts a theatrical. “Kuang gushi” verifies the conceptualization of theatricality as a relationship between performer, audience, and the space in which both interact. It reveals a self-reflexive intertwining of the three theatrical elements of staging, acting, and viewing, a division heuristically followed in Part II that focuses on the examination of the theatrical novel.

**Visualizing Theatrical Space**

The attention to theatrical structuring in illustrations prepares late imperial readers, and us, for reading fictional texts. Such images, like

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5 For example, Gu Ling 顾苓 comments that the Shuihu illustrations by the famous and eccentric painter and fiction illustrator Chen Hongshou 陈洪绶 (1598–1652) accentuate the intention of the author through visualization. Gu Ling, “Ba Shuihu tu” 步水浒圖, in Zhu Yuxuan 朱一玄 and Liu Yuchen 劉毓忱, eds., Shuihu zhuan ziliao huibian 水滸傳資料彙編 (Tianjin: Nankai daxue chubanshe, 2002), p. 609.