INTRODUCTION

THEATER, ILLUSTRATION, AND TIME

This study draws together the various elements of Wanli culture—illustration, painting, theater, literature, philosophy—and examines their interrelation and intersection in the context of the drama publication. In her essay “Printing as Performance,” the scholar Katherine Carlitz suggests the logic of conceiving drama publication as a distinct genre, making the point that “the structure and prosody of drama gave rise to specialized printing conventions,” from which it follows that drama publishing should be studied “as a discrete category, separate from the late Ming publishing boom.”1 This study particularly focuses on drama illustrations because they epitomize most of the important trends and developments in illustration during the Wanli era (1573–1619). What is more, both the quantity and quality of plays published during the period are unmatched in all of Chinese history. During these years, then, drama illustration was at the very center of Chinese culture. Illustration illuminates not only the drama and printing culture, but aspects of late Ming philosophy, religion, morality, and aesthetics. There is thus the opportunity not only to explore the formal language of illustration, but also to reconstruct something of the late Ming worldview. This study is not primarily concerned with market forces, or the advance of technology, or the celebration of aesthetic achievement, all of which are legitimate but by now familiar avenues of exploration. The attempt, rather, is to reconstruct the cultural complexity of drama illustrations—that is, illustrations originally included in editions of printed plays—by recognizing their sometimes obscure and always subtle relation to the traditions of theater, literature, and printing. Only after establishing each illustration in relation to text, edition, and genre—and beyond these in relation to the culture in its full scope—can we approach the full complexity of its expression, for illustrations are carefully crafted to resonate within each of these contexts. In the main, illustrations have been studied as isolated instances of artistic expression, as if analogous

1 Katherine Carlitz, “Printing as Performance,” 269.
to paintings. The necessity of restoring illustrations to their original context—of conceiving them as essentially contextual—is the most fundamental emphasis of the present study.

As drama illustrations are bound up with two different and conflicting media—the book and the stage—this study attempts to illuminate how these media responded to each other and collided with each other due to the sudden increase in quantity and quality of printed plays during the Wanli period. The collision of these two media brought the relation between printed plays and theatrical performance under the close scrutiny of contemporary literati and drama critics. There was a widespread anxiety, expressed by almost every drama critic in the late Ming, that the popularity of published drama was severing the traditional relation between the play and the stage, and that the new market for published drama was creating a temptation to write for the reader rather than for the actor and the theatergoer. Many literati rightly feared the overthrow of the theater as the dominant cultural and moral institution, and they struggled on numerous fronts to uphold the status of the printed play as a medium rooted in the traditions of the theater, and illustration became the primary field of ideological battle. The most interesting questions—those with which the present study will largely be involved—are why this rearguard action against the incursions of a purely literary culture was so vehemently undertaken and how the literati went about the attempt to preserve the centrality of the theater within a rapidly burgeoning print culture.

The answer to these questions, by no means obvious, has to do with the Chinese conception of the past as a perpetual moral and intellectual example. Scholar Stephen Owen’s Remembrances, a study of the experience of the past in classical Chinese literature, makes all the salient points. If the master figure in Western literary discourse is metaphor, Owen argues that the comparable figure in Chinese literary discourse is “synecdoche, the part that leads to the whole, some enduring fragment from which we try to reconstruct the lost totality.” In terms of temporal conception, this implies that each moment beckons to all past moments and functions as a means of access to the larger temporal

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2 In many American films produced in the early and mid-twentieth century, the opening credits are framed by a proscenium or by theatrical curtains. This practice also demonstrates a reluctance to abandon the familiar conventions of the theater. When film found its own footing as an autonomous medium, this practice was dropped.

3 Stephen Owen, Remembrances, 2.