Prior to the Wanli period, Chinese drama was inseparable from the act of performance.\(^1\) Performance, in the Chinese idea, embodies not only the recitation and dramatization of a text, but as a strict rule singing and dancing as well, and thus combines elements of Western drama, ballet, and opera. Not only were plays composed exclusively for performance, but the essential quality of a play was considered to inhere in the performance rather than the text. A play like Mudan ting by Tang Xianzu, for example, was often criticized during the late Ming period for failing to lend itself to live performance.\(^2\) It was considered

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\(^1\) That performance played a more important role than publication in the Yuan and early Ming periods is revealed in several respects. First, most of the Yuan plays that we know are from editions published during the late Ming period, including the Maiwang Guan edition in 1588–9, Zang Maoxun edition in 1616, and Meng Chengshun edition in 1633, which leads modern scholars to conclude that the study of Yuan drama is actually a study of Ming drama. For a discussion of the editorial intention of the late Ming editors/publishers in rewriting and publishing the Yuan drama see Patricia Sieber’s study *Theaters of Desire*. Second, but there are many mural paintings, art objects, stage constructions, and sculptures that offer us a chance to glimpse the reality of the theater during the Yuan dynasty. The dissemination of the stories thus largely depended on performance. Third, the early play Huanmen zidi cuo lishen written by Gu Hang cairen informs us that the performance scripts actors used were in manuscript form, suggesting that drama was not common reading. A reprint of the manuscript in *Yongle dadian* is included in *GBXQCK*, 1st series.

\(^2\) Zang Maoxun was Tang’s chief critic. He edited an anthology of Tang’s plays titled *Linchuan simeng*. In his annotations on the margins of the pages, Zang explains his textual changes and constantly criticizes Tang’s plays as poorly suited to the demands of performance. His comments on *Zichai ji* are typical (see Zang Maoxun, ed., *Linchuan simeng*, 8b, 10b, 12a–b). Late Ming playwrights like Shen Jing, Feng Menglong, Ling Mengchu all criticized Tang for not knowing the *Kunqu* music, an important dramatic music genre that emerged in the late Ming period and dominated the theaters of the era, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Modern scholar Xu Shuofang argues that Tang’s musical lyrics were grafted onto Yihuang rather than Kunqu music. See “Tang Xianzu xiqu de qiangdiao he ta de shidai,” 105–110. Catherine Swatek proposes that *Mudan ting* was performed both in *Yihuang* style (following the opinion of Xu Shuofang) and in *Kunshan* style. See *Peony Pavilion Onstage*, 5, 294–295 (note). Zhou Yude cites
a great play on its literary merits, but also very flawed. It was only after a purely literary conception of drama became dominant during the Tianqi and Chongzhen periods that it came to be recognized as the pinnacle of Chinese drama. The plays of Shen Jing (1553–1610), on the other hand, were considered among the greatest plays of Ming drama during the late Ming period solely on their merits as performance pieces, but have since fallen into relative obscurity with the change in standards. Xu Fuzuo (1560–1630) describes Shen’s work *Nan juong shisan diao qupu*, which emphasizes the harmony between the intonation of each character and the accompanying melody, as “a shining compass that provides direction for playwrights amid the forest of poetry.” This emphasis on performance is attested by Li Yu (1611–c. 1680) in his miscellany *Xianqing ouji*, published in 1671:

> Lyrics [plays] are composed exclusively for performance. The philosophy of performance is difficult to propound. It is a waste when good lyrics are performed by the wrong people and good singers are taught in the wrong way. These sins are tantamount to tearing paintings and smashing jade.  

Li Yu equates inadequate performance with the physical destruction of the work of graphic art. The metaphor suggests that performance is an integral part of the dramatic work; an inadequate performance destroys the work as entirely as a painting is destroyed when it is torn up. Performance was not only indispensable but was perhaps a more essential component than the text itself in Chinese drama culture. It was held that performance brings the text to life; unperformed, the text is all but meaningless. The indispensability of the musical and visual evidences from the writings of late Ming scholars that Tang’s plays were performed in both *Yihuang* and *Kanshan* styles (“*Linchuang simeng he Ming Qing wutai,*” 79–87).

3 The competition between Shen Jing and Tang Xianzu eventually led to the formation of two major camps in drama theory during the late Ming: School of Music (Gelü pai) and School of Literary Talent (Caiqing pai). See Zhang Jing, *Ming Qing chuanqi daolun*, 30–41; Guo Yingde, *Ming Qing wenren chuanqi yanjiu*, 10–5; Zhang Geng and Guo Hancheng, *Zhongguo xiqu tongshi*, 285–124; John Hu, “Ming Dynasty Drama,” 72–4. Xu Shuofang holds that Tang wished to preserve the local theatrical traditions while Shen wished to establish *Kunqu* as the universal musical form of the stage. See “Tang Xianzu xiqu de qiangdiao he ta de shidai,” 105–110.


5 For a study of Li Yu’s life and his writing see Patrick Hanan’s *The Invention of Li Yu*.