Glancing over the illustrations discussed in chapter three, we are apt to exclaim at their beauty or dismiss them as conventional, but questions should arise as well: Why were performance illustrations included in the published plays? How do the performance illustrations relate to the text? Do performance illustrations inform our reading of the text—and how so? Why did publishers choose to adopt the inspiration from the stage? Do performance illustrations express opinions or inscribe readings of the plays they ornament? In scholar Rudolf Wagner’s words, “…anything that points toward an entrance into the subtext, even if it is the form of minute changes in the illustrations that often accompany the texts, may help in giving access to the realm” of drama. In our own reading experience illustrations often inspire more than aesthetic pleasure; so too illustrations inspired the readers of the Wanli period. The illustration not only shows how readers of the Wanli period read their published plays, but also introduces a new form of reading. And then, the new habits of reading in turn informs us of the social understanding of drama during that era; and how illustrations guide the reception of plays. This study attempts to investigate the contributions of performance illustrations to the drama culture of the Wanli period. As the performance illustrations are inspired by theatrical performances, we must investigate what kind of theatrical experience was so essential to the late Ming audience that they wanted to reproduce that specific experience through performance illustration in their reading. With this understanding serving as the foundation, we can then unfold the phenomenology of reading introduced by illustrations during the Wanli period. We must ask why the publishers, who oversaw every aspect of their publications, felt this to be important. What motivates the publishers in the attempt to recreate a theatrical-viewing experience in a literary context? Anne McLaren proposed that after the 1470s “illustrations are used for aesthetic and decorative appeal” (quoted in the previous chapter), but the attempt

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1 Rudolf Wagner, *The Contemporary Chinese Historical Drama*, ix.
to recreate the theatrical viewing experience cannot be explained in terms of visual pleasure. Late Ming publishers’ huge investment of effort and resources in performance illustration would seem vainly spent as the actual theater was readily accessible to the entire reading public. Wanli readers might just as well have given up reading and become theater-goers. If not theatrical-viewing pleasure, then, we must thus ask what Wanli publishers were attempting to offer their readers, and what drew readers to the offered reward? This chapter attempts to provide answers to this important question.

History and Drama

In those drama publications of the Wanli period featuring performance illustrations, the surrounding text—either in the preface, post-face, prologue, or epilogue—tends to emphasize the play’s function as a historical document. The kinds of analogy between drama and history suggested by these publications fall within three categories: first, drama as historical record and the playwright as historian; second, drama as overt commentary on historical event; and third, drama as didactic vehicle for the transmission of ‘exemplary names’ from past times. The coincidence of performance illustration and this historical bent in Wanli drama is not accidental. Though one might be able to find counter-examples in the hundreds of plays and editions published during the Wanli period, such as Fuchun Tang edition of *Yingwu ji,* these aspects of Wanli drama are so often joined that we cannot dismiss the phenomena as less than significant. It is worth our attention and effort to explain why this coincidence of tendencies existed. It seems that this conception of drama as history—in whatever sense—plays a very important role not only in the dramatic culture but also the blooming of performance illustration during the Wanli period. This section explores drama and history in their analogous role as a prelude to further discussion of the relation between performance illustration and the conception of drama as history.

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2 In the prologue of *Yingwu ji,* the author argues against the search for historical records to be the source of play because he thinks theater is mainly for entertainment. Please see the quotation on pages 186–7 of this chapter.