Richard II has been ably deconstructed, psychoanalyzed, historicized, and, more recently, queered. The agendas of the legion of scholars who have scrutinized the play through these schools of theory, along with their results, are as variegated as we might expect, although they tend to congregate, for obvious reasons, around a fairly consistent set of concerns: the status of monarchy, the concept and practice of usurpation, the impact of loss on the psyche, and the implications of political change.¹ These theoretically-inflected approaches to Richard II are in the mode of “strong theory.” Strong theory has been described as that which produces a “highly organized way of interpreting information so that what is possibly relevant can be quickly abstracted and magnified,” usually as part of “a triumphant advance toward truth and vindication” of the scholar’s thesis and, more broadly, his or her methods (Sedgwick 2003: 135).² One question this tendency raises is whether there is room, when faced with such a critically over-determined work as Richard II, for examining its affect rather than the information it communicates or the ideology it embeds. Attention to Richard II as a species of performance is one way to explore this proposition, and to experiment with a phenomenological performance criticism that could be an alternative or “weak theory,” one that accounts more for what the play does than what it signifies.

Weak theory when applied to a literary or dramatic text can be a way to register the affect of art. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her work with this term, contrasts it with the totalizing tendency of strong modes of theory, seeing in “weak theory” a more open-ended alternative to the often all-encompassing determinism of strong theory.³ She writes “there are important phenomenological and theoretical tasks that can be accomplished only through local theories and nonce taxonomies” (Sedgwick 2003: 145). My interest here is in mobilizing an exploratory, “weak” theory of “local” theatrical affects to analyze how Richard II creates the sensation that prompted Stanley Wells to describe the tone of the play as persistently “elegiac” (Wells 1969: 7). The gloomy content of the many speeches in Richard II that explore mourning and loss are perhaps sufficient to substantiate the statement. To expand upon Wells’s view, we could say that the play is elegiac without ever being an elegy, for any particular object of its mournfulness is ultimately elusive. That
Richard II creates a general feeling of sadness that is difficult to connect clearly with the fall of its title figure or the movement of its plot is a result of the play's aesthetic of incompleteness. I call this the dramaturgy of discomfort, whereby its effect upon audiences can be understood as unsettling in ways that can, but need not necessarily be, mapped onto Elizabethan political controversies, the most common starting and ending point for critical readings of the play. Richard II conveys its discomforts by mobilizing a full range of the "sensory experience" of performance (States 1985: 25). What follows is an attempt to encounter Richard II and its "discomfortable" impact in the context of theater as a seeing, hearing, and feeling place.

Keeping the critical pursuit of meaning—as it is inflected by history, by historicizing, or by theory more broadly—at bay as long as possible responds to theater as a form. Theater "occurs" (Beckerman 1979: 6). Like any occurrence, it can be messy and difficult to make sense of as it is happening. As a temporal art form, it creates involvement in an event for those on the stage and for those in the audience. Its distinctive "affordances"—W.B. Worthen's term for the yield of the dynamic exchanges between script, actor, and audience in theater—are numerous, including most prominently the spectacle of living bodies and the aural pleasures of spoken language (Worthen 2010: xviii). As these engagements unfold, audiences experience a play. This entails an intellectual response to ideas, but it also entails a more diffuse corporeal response that is, admittedly, difficult to describe. Despite such difficulty, I aim in this chapter to analyze the experience of Richard II in search of how the play works on audience members' minds and bodies. Such a goal is not on its own a novel enterprise. Formalism is a traditional way to assess how literature works, and the language of Richard II has long been an object of formalist scrutiny of various sorts. Performance theory as I employ it is itself a type of formalism. It reminds us to focus on the dynamics of theater as a form with a particular set of affects that operate in conjunction with, but also to some extent in excess of, its particular content. To analyze Richard II in this way is challenging because the play is so freighted with cultural and historical significances. But if we keep in mind that audiences in Shakespeare's time went to plays for the experience that being at the theater offered as much as anything else (as much, that is, as for the chance to see monarchy demystified, to see political change from the feudal to the modern represented, to see history made an allegory for the present) then there is something to be gained from imagining how the lively eventness of dramatic shows worked on audiences.

Language is always speech in a play, and so it is always bodily. Our access to Shakespeare's language today must be through the text, and this has complex implications for evaluating Elizabethan performance. But recent debates about the relation of texts to performances, or about Shakespeare's aspirations for literariness, can never be resolved in a way that would deny the fact that the plays as we have them originated as working scripts for theatrical presentation, and thus as prompts to speaking in the spatio-temporal situation of a live event before an audience. A true phenomenology of the long-vanished Shakespearean stage is impossible of course, but some of the most exciting recent work in Elizabethan theater history and criticism has been that which attempts to map the phenomenal contours of the early modern theater event and to imagine what the experience at those playhouses was like. It was, as such scholarship has shown, for all involved a fully sensory experience.

W.B. Worthen has urged us to view "dramatic writing as an encounter with embodiment, a means to reflect writing as an instrument of action rather than as a script of subjection." In Worthen's words, the texts we have can be understood as "instigations" for activity, and that activity is inherently corporeal (Worthen 2010: 76, 77). Herbert Blau writes that "the primary architectural space of the theater is and has always been the body of the actor" (Blau 2002: 50). This emphasis on embodiment foregrounds the bodily work of acting as a key aspect of the performance event. While attention to kinds of stage action—fighting, kissing, dying, sleeping, etc.—can be a stimulating approach to the phenomena of Shakespeare's stage, the bodily act that occurs on that stage more than any other is, of course, speaking. Close attention to Shakespeare's language today is necessarily mediated by texts, but it is important to keep in mind always that his poetry is designed to exist as a physical act. Since speaking on the Shakespearean stage more often than not means speaking poetry, Robert Pinsky's formula takes on added force when we apply it to the words uttered there: "poetry is a vocal, which is to say a bodily, art. The medium of poetry is a human body: the column of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds in the larynx and the mouth" (Pinsky 1998: 8).

Richard II, a play composed entirely in verse, showcases players in the process of speaking poetry, and thus conveys to audiences, almost constantly, the corporeal exertion that Pinsky describes, as well as, significantly, pauses and rests from this exertion, small moments that highlight the kinetics of speech that go on around them. Shakespeare calls attention to this in Richard II through the pervasive use of forms of the word "breath" to indicate the act of speaking and to describe language itself. The perception of the physicality of performance—that speech is, like breath, something that a body produces through a complex physiological process—is a central aspect of the audience experience at a play. This is part of the total physical sensation of being at a play that Bernard Beckerman has described: "although theater response seems to derive principally from visual and auditory perception, in reality it relies upon a totality of perception that can be better termed kinesthetic." Audiences "are aware of a performance through varying degrees of concentration and relaxation within [their] bodies" (Beckerman 1979: 150). Being at a play means having a physical response to the impact of its language, and I will discuss here the fleshy center of performance through attention to the corporeality of speech. I will consider also how audiences might experience a physical response to plotting and narrative turns. Along with those two main avenues of analysis, I will discuss as well two other phenomenal moments in
Richard II: the music the king hears in his cell, and the spectacle of his coffin in the play's closing moments. If, as Beckerman states, the primary aim of theater is to "affect spectators," the aim of my analysis in this chapter is to assess some ways that Richard II does this, with an emphasis on the impact of the temporality and physicality of performance (Beckerman 1979: 8).

One note before I begin: Harry Berger's book-length study of Richard II, Imaginary Audition, is the most ambitious effort to date to analyze the play in its theatrical situation, and is thus an important precedent for my work here. Berger's brilliantly careful analysis of dramatic language's illocutionary power provides a worthwhile model for a theatrically-sensitive critical practice that avoids the Scylla and Charybdis of what he calls "silt-eyed analysis" and "wide-eyed playgoing" (Berger 1989: 9–42). I depart from Berger in two ways. First, while I am aware that what he calls "decelerated" reading is the enabling condition of teaching and producing critical comment on dramatic texts, my readings of Richard II attempt to imagine the play as it can affect audiences in "real time." This means understanding the plenitude of Shakespeare's theater, the densely layered poetry that is uttered amidst all manner of stage business and plot movements, as the point of the whole enterprise rather than a problem that requires a slow-motion critical solution. Going to the theater circa 1595 meant getting more than you could process in the moment and this overload is itself a sensation that is part of the pleasure of being there. In Richard II, as I will discuss below, such overload helps to sharpen a desire for moments of closure or satisfaction. Second, Berger's speech-act oriented examination of the complex dynamics of speaking and auditing, whereby we follow characters talking and listening to each other and to themselves, leaves little room in his study for consideration of the actual audience in the theater and the kind of experience the play affords them. I differ from Berger then, also in my greater degree of interest in the playgoing audience.

I

One of the most prominent features of Richard II is that it is exclusively in verse, making it one of just four such plays in the Shakespeare canon. It has been argued that Elizabethan audiences possessed a greater sensitivity to the rhythms of spoken verse than moderns do. They could discern the difference between prose and poetry, for instance, and, more specifically, could hear iambic pentameter (see Freer 1981, McDonald 2001). If this is so, audience experience of Richard II would have been structured in part by the aural shapes of its verse. A play written entirely in verse is, at first glance, a picture of regularity and rhythmic consistency. But the iambic pentameter in Richard II is broken up throughout by variations in stress and line length, so that the blank verse exhibits the plasticity that the plays of Christopher Marlowe brought into vogue. Richard II's predominant blank verse is further disrupted by its high proportion of rhyming lines, which amount to approximately one quarter of the total. The rhythms of spoken language impact the bodies of auditors at the same time as the content of what is spoken impacts their intellects. In straining to hear an expected end rhyme, in being surprised by one that appears seemingly at random, in being presented with a sudden pause in a speech, audiences of Richard II are put off balance throughout the play by the variegated sound patterns. The variations Shakespeare introduces throughout the play introduce tension and can affect audience members' experience of Richard II by preventing them from getting comfortable with its poetic rhythms.

We can begin by considering the effects of rhyme. A pattern of end-rhymes, once initiated, sets up expectations for the completion provided by like sounds articulated at a regular interval. Because it could be conventional on the Elizabethan stage for a speaker to close out a speech with an end rhyme as a kind of verbal punctuation mark, or to use one to give a group of lines an aphoristic cast, many uses of couplets in Richard II would probably have been considered unremarkable. For instance, when Richard ends his call for the disputants in the opening scene of the play to be brought forth, he notes "High stomached are they both and full of ire, / In rage, deaf as the sea, hasty as fire" (1.1.18–19). Here the couplet sounds like Richard wants it to: as a piece of worldly wisdom from an authority figure, coolly attempting to define and perhaps diminish two reckless subjects. It is isolated in that it does not follow or precede another set of rhymes, and when Bolingbroke and Mowbray subsequently round out their own impassioned speeches with couplets (45–46 and 67–68), they too are employing rhyme in a limited and conventional way.

But the use of rhyme soon becomes odd in this same scene. As Richard moves to halt the escalating conflict he declares:

Wrath-kindled gentlemen, be ruled by me: Let's purge this choler without letting blood. This we prescribe, though no physician; Deep malice makes too deep incision. Forget, forgive, conclude and be agreed; Our doctors say this is no month to bleed. Good uncle, let this end where it begun; We'll calm the Duke of Norfolk, you your son.

(1.1.152–59)

Richard "breaks into rhyme" three lines in to this eight-line utterance; that is, well before the statement's concluding lines, where we might expect a couplet to emerge. Once again, this could be viewed as a means of characterization. Shakespeare makes Richard rhyme here as a way to show the king's strategy to deploy aphoristic—even proverbial—language as a means to assert his wisdom and nudge his subjects toward compliance. But this patterned speech is, surprisingly, picked up by the men implicated in the lines: Gaunt,
Mowbray, and Bolingbroke. The four characters proceed to engage in roughly forty lines of uninterrupted couplets, in some instances splitting the couplets (such as between Richard and Mowbray at 164–65), and as the exchange goes on it becomes less clear why rhyming has become a quartet performance.

It is possible to build a thematic reading of this interruption of rhyme, a “strong theory” of like endings. The scene as a whole enacts a gradual process by which Richard loses control of his subjects through his inability to mediate a dispute. He perhaps attempts to restore some form of harmony through language, and his subjects show superficial fealty by following his lead. This sense is confirmed if we take note of where the pattern breaks. As the rhymed dialogue reaches forty-plus lines, Richard declares, in what audiences might now expect to be the first line of a couplet, “We were not born to sue but to command,” clear enough as an expression of royal power. But this thought is immediately undermined in what follows:

Which since we cannot do to make you friends
Be ready as your lives shall answer it
At Conventry upon Saint Lambert’s Day.

Richard admits the limits of his power, the limits his subjects and audiences must clearly sense already, and at the moment this is made explicit the ideal harmony of royal control his rhyming might imply falters. Even if one strains to hear “command” and “friends” as an imperfect rhyme, the following set of lines is a definitive break. In another strange turn, though, the final six lines of this utterance resume the end-rhyme pattern, and the scene comes to a close. This could be meant to indicate that Richard is regaining his composure, papering over the rupture he himself revealed in articulating his weak position.

And thus, presumably, one could treat each interruption of rhyme that occurs in the play as I have briefly done here with the play’s first scene: by finding a particular thematic purpose the rhyme serves. But the odd oscillations of blank verse and extended patches of rhymed endings also imply that breaks into rhyme like the one that begins with Richard’s bad joke about incisions and physicians are not necessarily amenable to smooth, clarifying exegesis. An extreme alternate position would be to see all such instances as arbitrary, as random bursts of decorative language. Neither of these positions is persuasive, though. I am inclined, then, to pursue a weak theory of the affect of performance, one that explores, more loosely, the feeling these semi-regular interruptions of rhyme convey to audiences of Richard II.

Blank verse sets up a certain kind of expectation for rhythms of speech that can be subtly modulated through variations in stress or syllable count. As we have seen, the conventional use of rhyme to end scenes or long speeches is another variation that might be expected and absorbed into the expectations of a blank verse play. But the more extended moments such as the one I have considered here, when rhyme disrupts and is shared among different characters for no clear reason, are more unusual in the Shakespeare canon and are more difficult to assimilate.15 Playgoers may not have instinctively wanted or required patterned speech in theaters. But when Richard II sets up a blank verse pattern, then deviates from it unpredictably as it does in its many passages of extended couplets, a probable effect on the audience is immediate enjoyment in the satisfactions of rhyme amid a general feeling of unsettlement. The bodily pleasure of rhyme comes in part through relief from tension set up by the sound of the word that is awaiting its pair. The unpredictable aural shapes of Richard II pose a simple question that is triggered in this first scene and that stays active for the entire duration of the play: is this line going to be followed by a rhyme or not? Through this means, the play creates and continually heightens an atmosphere of anticipation and also creates desire for completion in audiences—a corporeal tensing up of the body in anticipation of the relief of rhyme—a desire that is met inconsistently throughout the performance.

Another way that speech patterns contribute to the play of completion and incompleteness in Richard II is through the use of “short lines.” The interpretation of short lines is controversial. Questions abound about how deliberate they are versus how much they are a product of printing-house error or other contingency. A leading scholar of Shakespeare’s verse practices, George Wright, is skeptical that short lines serve much of a theatrical purpose. Others, with whom I tend to agree, see short lines as implicit stage directions that point actors toward pauses.16 As with most aspects of Shakespeare’s metrical activity, it is foolish to assign with certainty “rules” about how short lines signify or how they ought to function practically. But attention to a few instances of short lines in Richard II will, I think, help us gauge how such lines can be instigations for types of performance that affect physical response to the play’s tempo.17

In the intense scene before and around Flint Castle, Bolingbroke and his allies speak several short lines. When for instance, Harry Percy tells Bolingbroke that “the castle royally is manned, my lord, / Against thy entrance,” Percy’s second line is well short of the regular ten-syllable pentameter. After Bolingbroke protests that the castle cannot be “royally manned,” Percy tells him otherwise, leading with another short line: “Yes, my good lord, / It doth contain a king. King Richard lies / Within” (3.3.21–25).18 When Bolingbroke sends Northumberland to deliver a greeting to the King, he begins with a line of verse that is only three syllables long: “Noble lord” (3.3.31).

At the key moment when Richard has agreed to come down from the walls to meet Bolingbroke in person, he and his train must exit the walls above and descend, out of sight of the audience, to re-emerge. Northumberland in the meantime returns to deliver this news to Bolingbroke. This is the conversation that ensues, as printed in the Arden 3 Richard II:

Bolingbroke. What says his majesty?

Northumberland. Sorrow and grief of heart
Most editors do as the Arden 3 editor has done here: Bolingbroke's “What says his majesty?” and Northumberland's “Sorrow and grief of heart” are made, typographically, to appear as one line; they are thus counted as one in most modern editions' lineation.20 In the early printed texts of Richard II, from the 1597 first quarto to the 1623 First Folio, these lines are of course not typographically sutured. The creation of shared lines out of printed short lines is the attempt, initiated by eighteenth-century editors, to fashion what Paul Bertram has wittily called the “platonic pentameter” (Bertram 1981: 26). Whatever one thinks of such editorial moves, this instance seems peculiar. The line created (“What says his majesty? Sorrow and grief of heart”) is not even a pentameter, but a hexameter. If we allow ourselves to consider what the Arden calls line 184 as, instead, two separate lines, we have here a seven-line exchange in which only two lines (Northumberland's at 185 and Bolingbroke's at 188) have ten syllables.

These short lines create room for silences in performance that productions of the play can “seize” upon (Worthen 2010: 62). In each instance, the text of the play allows players space to be still, to gesture, or to enact hesitation. In the case of the exchanges here, the speakers are on the threshold of essentially arresting the rightful king. An awesome step is being taken, and this is perhaps reflected in the silences interspersed in what seem on the surface to be fairly business-like lines of waiting for someone to appear. The gravity, but also the general weirdness of the situation, is reflected in the physical action of Bolingbroke kneeling to Richard (the direction is implicit in Richard's lines following, but also spelled out as a stage direction in the quarto). A man who kneels before the king he is in the act of deposing (what else can it mean to call a king before you in the “base court,” and then insist he accompany you to London?) is like a man to “double business bound.” And like that figure which Claudius conjures up in Hamlet, in this moment Bolingbroke confusedly “stand[s] in pause” as to how he should act or speak (Hamlet 3.3.41).

I agree with skeptics that it is implausible to assume that short line silences would represent exactly the lost metrical beats so that, for instance, the two-beat “stand all apart” would need to be followed by a three-beat pause. But the abbreviated lines certainly must create room for some kind of discernable rest. As Worthen might say, the short lines do not subject a player—certainly today, and probably not even in 1595—to follow that lead. But if these short lines do, as I believe, work to create pauses, it is a means by which Shakespeare uses the temporality of theater to create effects on the audience. Anyone who has ever attended any kind of live event knows how excruciating ambiguous silence in such contexts can be, and how physically one feels the awkwardness and uncertainty of hesitation in performances. Charles Forker, in the Arden 3 edition, follows standard editorial practice in inserting a direction that Richard and his attendants have entered at some point in the conversation between Bolingbroke and Northumberland. Forker adds his own call for a “Flourish” to this direction, stating in a footnote that, because there are only a few lines between Richard's withdrawal above and his re-emergence below, the “Flourish” would “suffice to cover any awkwardness” that waiting for Richard might force (Forker 2002: 357). But the palpable awkwardness of this scene seems to me to be a legitimate dramaturgical aim rather than a matter to be “covered.” The short lines and silences around them in the conversation and Richard's re-appearance become another means—the larger purpose of which could be any number of things, thematically—by which the disrupted rhythm of the play's language creates an unsettling atmosphere in the playhouse, one of uncertainty and unrelieved tension.21

Unrelieved tension and, perhaps, even anti-climax. Richard's beautiful, pithy lines “Down, down I come, like glist'ring Phæthon,/ Wanting the manage of unruly jades” create an image of imminent, spectacular, violent failure: could he, in distraction or in a self-destructive frenzy, tumble down, as does poor Arthur in King John? Or will he emerge face to face with Bolingbroke and challenge him to the duel that never materialized in the first act, or even attack his tormentors, bravely but recklessly, as he will do at the play's end? None of these things happens. Instead, he emerges resignedly, and the scene ends with a whimper:

*King Richard.* Set on towards London, cousin, is it so?
*Bolingbroke.* Yes, my good lord.
*King Richard.* Then I must not say no.

As a final comment on short lines in this scene, it should be noted that the Folio prints Richard's first line here as two short lines (unlike the quarto, which prints it as one). In the Folio, we read “Set on towards London: / Cousin, is it so?” Editors now routinely space Richard's final line, as quoted here, so that it fulfills Bolingbroke's. In modern texts we get two lines of complete pentameter that could be, by the Folio's authority anyway, performed as four short ones, ending this portentous scene with more pregnant silences and awkward pauses.22

Sedgewick, discussing how strong modes of theory can account neatly for the complexities of messy texts like Richard II, writes that “A strong theory always has something to say, about anything, because it can always say No” to those things that don't fit its hermeneutic mold. In contrast to this “If a weak theory encounters some terrain unlike any it has ever tripped over—if it
can’t understand this terrain as significantly similar or resemblant enough to one or more in its domain—it will throw up its hands, shrug its shoulders, remain dumb” (Sedgwick 2003: 121). It is in the space created by remaining dumb that we find room to assess affect. I have concentrated so far on what some might see as eccentric topics, or what might seem like mere specks on Richard II’s grand surface that don’t amount to a very illuminating account of the play’s meaning. But I believe the things I have observed here offer provocative perspectives from which to gauge how the play works on audiences: how its most outstanding feature—its spoken poetry—introduces and then only partially or inconsistently releases tension in the bodies of those taking it in as they exert themselves to hear a rhyme that doesn’t come after a pattern of them has emerged, as they feel the surprising sensation of a rhyme they did not anticipate, or as they fidget through an uncomfortable, uncertain pause. All of these responses add up to a general feeling of being put out of sorts at the theater, a feeling deepened by my next topic: the sound of deranged music in a key moment late in the play.

II

King Richard’s only soliloquy—one of just two in all of Richard II—is another occasion for creating discomfort through auditory manipulations. Richard’s words in his cell are for a time accompanied by music. Just as theater combines the spectacle of moving bodies with the sounds of spoken language for audiences to process simultaneously, it can layer sound so that speech, as at this moment, occurs simultaneously with music. Audiences do not choose somehow which sounds to listen to. They take in both. The music begins about forty lines into Richard’s sixty-six line soliloquy. Stage directions indicating when it becomes audible occur in both the quarto and the Folio texts (at slightly different starting points), and Richard makes clear that it is diegetic: “Music, do I hear?” (5.5.41). As Richard’s only soliloquy, this speech allows audiences a unique moment in which to enjoy a fantasy of intimacy with the fallen monarch. When Richard declares that he hears the music, he signals to the auditors that they are sharing a phenomenal experience with him. The character on stage and the playgoers in the theater are listening to music together.

Richard constructs a comparison between the music and his situation:

Ha! ha, keep time! How sour sweet music is
When time is broke and no proportion kept!
So is it in the music of men’s lives.
And here have I the daintiness of ear
To check time broke in a disordered string,
But for the concord of my state and time
Had not an ear to hear my true time broke.

(5.5.42-49)

Richard responds to the music, as it were, instrumentally. He puts it to a moralizing purpose when he claims the music to be disorderd and then reflects on his sensitive ear for music and his bin ear for politics. In one way, we might think that the music is “used up” by Richard’s reflections on it, as it ceases to be an auditory event and becomes instead a figure for the play’s explorations of power and authority. That is certainly what it is like when reading the text without taking the theatrical event into account. Such a move is also the critical impulse of many Shakespeare scholars, here and when faced with other instances of music in the plays: what does it mean, symbolize, stand for? Usually, as one critic points out, the answers have something to do with early modern ideas about “cosmic harmony” (Lindley 2008: 93). Such questions and answers are warranted by the conventions of Elizabethan thought and musical theory to be sure. But we should also consider a weaker line of thought, that of what might be left over from such discussions, and how music might exceed even Richard’s clever exposition here and affect audiences in other ways.

For instance, the music that is being played may have been some tune composed and employed by the musicians of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men to be recycled in the theater as needed, in which case it could evoke memories of past performances. More likely, it was an allusion to or fragment of some standard popular tune. What kind of response would the audience have to this moment in Richard II if the music played was all or a bit of some currently popular comic ditty or love song? If the music was familiar, and it was, as Richard says, played in audibly disordered fashion, this would have been a means to transfer some sense of Richard’s frustration to the audience. Hearing a well-known, especially a well-liked, piece of music mangled can have a physically irritating effect on any listener. When Richard cries out “This music mads me! Let it sound no more” (5.5.61) the play unites its title character and its playgoers in a moment of shared experience: listening to the music itself, as well as the revulsion that botched harmony can inspire.

Forker, like other editors, assumes that the music must stop on command here, and inserts a stage direction to this effect in his Richard II edition. He uses a footnote to explain the decision: “the music probably stops or has died away by [line] 66, beyond which it would be distracting.” I would suggest—in keeping with my comments above where I quibbled with Forker’s attempt to avoid “awkwardness” in the scene at Flint Castle—that the music here is meant to be distracting, to Richard as well as to theater audiences. Richard II may, at this moment, be making more palpable—literally by making it louder and more annoying to the senses—the kind of discomfort that has been part of the sensory experience it provides through its pervasive verbal modulations. Music can have the effect of uniting a crowd in a more positive sense, and this was most likely the case with the jigs that followed the dramatic presentations of the early modern stage. Playgoers at Richard II, used to the conventions of play duration, probably knew that such a musical moment of communal revelry was in the offing by the time Richard is driven mad by the
mangled music he hears. But such felicity is not yet available to them. The play goes on, and the feeling of being at Richard II remains one of strain and dissatisfaction that can be felt physically here through the musical disorder, a sensory effect that joins the other aural stops and starts characteristic of the play's variegated sound patterns.

III

Richard II is a play full of unanswered questions and mysterious motivations and agendas. From the cryptic accusations that open the play to the matter of how (dis)ingenuous are Bolingbroke's initial rationales for his return home, the play time and time again refuses to gratify audiences with an illuminating payoff. The feeling of unrelieved tension reverberates, then, from the level of the spoken verse line to the structure of the whole, something that is especially pointed in certain scenes. This question of plotting is intellectual, to be sure, but as the play offers a series of near conclusions that never arrive, narrative tension in Richard II can be said to be felt as well as comprehended. Most famously, the third scene of the play promises a duel between Mowbray and Bolingbroke, one that will result in death for one, possibly serious injury or death for the other, which Richard interrupts and annuls in favor of pronouncing banishment for both parties. And while the first scene of the play does not so explicitly promise and then deny a violent, definitive end to the debate between Mowbray and Bolingbroke, the bombast of their exchanges hints that an eruption of violence is possible throughout, especially once it becomes clear that Richard does not in fact have much control over them when it comes to matters of defending their honor and reputations. The "gage" scene later on (4.1) enacts, again, growing belligerence and a threat of violence that leads to an indefinite conclusion. Bolingbroke suspends the proceedings and defers indefinitely the combat that would resolve the heated disputes: "Lord appellants, / Your differences shall all rest under gage / Till I assign you to your days of trial" (4.1.105–7). This same scene also reveals that Mowbray is dead (4.1.103–4). From the moment Bolingbroke returned from his banishment, his main antagonist in the play, obviously, is Richard. But have playgoers forgotten Mowbray entirely? Might he be thought to hover over the play until this point? A great deal of time and energy are expended in the play's first and third scenes to establish Mowbray as a formidable presence, a powerful and important man with enemies and a checkered past. His own possible return from banishment, for playgoers not well versed in the particulars of the historical Duke of Norfolk's end, could well be a narrative shoe waiting to drop, even as the contest between Bolingbroke and Richard takes priority. In one sense, the announcement of his death could be a kind of resolution, but a profoundly unsatisfying one. A fuller kind of completion for the Bolingbroke / Mowbray plot—a duel, reconciliation, or some kind of confession scene where the veracity of their mutual accusations are settled—is now made impossible.

The scene in which Bolingbroke, prodded on both sides by the Duke and Duchess of York, pardons Aumerle for his conspiracy is probably where the play comes closest to providing relief from built-up tension: it compactly enacts a crisis, fueled by heightened emotions and desperate pleas that require adjudication, and a definitive resolution. But King Henry's justification for his decision creates more tension: "I pardon him [Aumerle], as God shall pardon me" (5.3.130). The phrase is a kind of chiasmus, but it is necessarily incomplete. The words express hope: they create an expectation that Bolingbroke will find pardon from God for his sins, which are unnamed here but must surely encompass the usurpation he has recently completed. Bolingbroke's anxiety that this pardon will not ever come—palpable by the end of the play—is hinted at here. In raising the question of Bolingbroke's culpability, this scene with York and his family, which seems calculated to satisfy desire for some kind of closure, instead articulates a new tension that must remain unresolved.

Shakespeare manipulates conventional expectations about characterization and plot turns that playgoers might bring to another key scene, a move which again foils a certain kind of anticipated conclusion. Midway through the play, the Queen and her ladies appear in a "garden" (3.4.1) and discuss how to fight off their feelings of trepidation and depression. A trio of gardeners enters, and the women decide to hide and eavesdrop. Playgoers would have had reason to expect a certain kind of stage type to inhabit the gardener roles here, prose-speaking or bawdy rustics played by the company clowns. Instead, the play presents exceptionally well-spoken figures, in full command of the verbal style that might have to this point seemed an index of aristocratic refinement. The Gardener's first words indicate his mastery of poetic language and his facility with aphoristic analogy: "Go, bind thou up young dangling apricocks, / Which, like unruly children, make their sire / Stoop with oppression of their prodigal weight" (3.4.29–31).

This manual-laboring menial is no Bottom, prone to malapropism or afflicted by an inability to speak iambic pentameter, nor is his political caniness of the sardonic, "school of life" kind exemplified by stage rustics like Derick in the Famous Victories of Henry V. His language conspicuously echoes Gaunt's early grandiloquence and figurative speech that likens the country to a garden. Given the elegant exposition of the commonwealth-as-garden trope, we might seem to be getting a kind of allegorical scene, a moment where characters on stage can communicate, around the frame of mimetic, an interpretation of the play's political crisis. But the presence of the Queen and her ladies as, for a brief time, silent observers complicates that expectation for the course of the scene as well, instead prompting anticipation for a certain kind of interaction rather than a moment of exposition or moralizing. The hidden observer who steps forth to reveal her presence to the unwitting observed can be a triumphant moment of discovery, one with
consequences for the discoverer or the discovered which might alter the plot of the play itself.

Shakespeare’s Love’s Labour’s Lost, probably first written and performed very close to when Richard II was, contains an especially intricate version of such a scene with a progression of such acts of voyeurism and exposure. By the end, Berowne can declare triumphantly, after he has caught his fellows in the act of admitting their transgressive loves, “Now step I forth to whip hypocrisy” (LLL 4.3.149). Quickly, of course, Berowne himself is discovered to also be in love. His elated moment of discovery is brief, and he is exposed to his fellows, as he had been exposed all along to the playgoers. But in the garden scene, playgoers do not see the enactment of a revelation or exposure of a character in the same way. Here, audiences do not learn much more than that things set in motion in the scenes before—the beginning of the deposition of Richard and the vilification of his friends—are underway. And the figure who is observing, the Queen, does not get any sort of leverage or gain power over the observed speaker through her act of voyeurism. Her angry words to the gardener when she comes forward and reveals herself do not expose him, or make him vulnerable to her in any way, as one might expect when the overheard speaker is confronted, especially when the confrontation involves an obvious asymmetry of social position. Her words only demonstrate her own lack of insight and information: “Say where, when and how / Cam’t thou by this ill tidings? Speak, thou wretch!” (3.4.79–80); as well as and her own vulnerability: “What, was I born to this, that my sad look / Should grace the triumph of great Bolingbroke?” (98–99).

The brief exchange of words between the gardener and Isabel does not capitalize on the dramatic possibilities of the Queen’s eavesdropping to reveal something to the audience. But it does contain a sudden irritation into rhyme. As she exits from the scene, the Queen speaks ten lines. The first four lines are blank verse, while the next six are heroic couplets. The final couplet pronounces a curse: “Gard’ner, for telling me these news of woe / Pray God the plants thou graft’st may never grow” (100–101). The gardener’s words that follow pick this rhyme pattern up, and he delivers his own six lines of rhymed iambic pentameter. At a moment when the play swerves from likely dramatical possibilities (lower-class figures who work the land are eloquent and serious, a hidden observer who comes forth to confront another character does not gain leverage over him) the play moves again into an arbitrary set of rhymes that, while in itself satisfying, throws audience expectations about the larger sound patterns of the play back into confusion.

Far from discomfitting the gardener, or provoking him to an angry or mocking response, the Queen’s ineffectual curse elicits kindness from him:

Poor Queen, so that thy state might be no worse,
I would my skill were subject to thy curse.
Here did she fall a tear. Here in this place
I’ll set a bank of rue, sour herb of grace.

Rue e’en for ruth here shortly shall be seen
In the remembrance of a weeping queen.

(102–7)

The gardener’s generous response to the Queen’s insults and curse is an unexpected end to a scene that works in a number of narratively counter-intuitive and aurally unsettling ways.

The fact that the gardener offers his sympathy to a person who has exited from the stage also emphasizes the failure of this comforting gesture. While its effects are not lost on the audience—it stands as one of the only such moments of unselﬁness exhibited in the entire play—it is in keeping with Richard II’s dramatization, throughout, of the failure of comfort. Gaunt cannot comfort the Duchess of Gloucester; nor can York comfort the dying Gaunt. Richard again and again articulates his own inconsolable state, and cites his friends’ failures to provide relief, as well as his own such failure, when, in the soliloquy before his death, his powers of imagination fail to resolve his mental anguish. In their parting scene, the Queen cannot be consoled by Richard. She claims that she is left in a state of suspension when they are separated, for now she must begin the attempt to “kill it [her heart] with a groan,” itself a perverse and impossible form of relief from anguish that can only be expressed in figurative terms. Shakespeare toys explicitly with the concept of comfort throughout 3.2, when Richard returns from Ireland. At the height of his delusions of sacred kingship, Richard pronounces Aumerle to be “discomfortable” when his cousin attempts to inject some pragmatism into Richard’s response to Bolingbroke. As the scene unfolds, and the artifice of divine monarchy begins to crumble, Aumerle twice implores Richard with the word “comfort” (3.2.75, 82), the second time gaining a fragile success in the form of a positive response from Richard: “I had forgot myself,” a momentary resolve that falls apart as more bad news about his position emerges. Richard can finally say “Of comfort no man speak!” (3.2.144). The failure of comfort extends, of course, to Bolingbroke’s final words in the play, as he exits the stage in search of absolution. But this failure of comfort is not limited to the characters on stage. It is the experience the play provides for audiences.

Richard II is a profoundly “discomfortable” play. Its spoken language includes frequent unusual variations—the extended rhymes and short lines—that prevent audiences from attaining a sense of a stable spoken verse order. This, combined with the play’s penchant for aborted climaxes, undermined conventions, and staged moments of inconsolability, creates an unsettling, suspended feeling that works as much on playgoers’ bodies as on their minds. In examining one final phenomenal encounter from the play’s closing moments I hope to show another means by which Richard II works to prevent audiences from attaining a sense of completion from the experience of its enactment that could also have a visceral impact on playgoers: the spectacle of the coffin in the closing moments of the play as it is brought into, and then taken out of, view.
IV

Richard's soliloquy brings playgoers closer to the character of the king in a few ways. First, as discussed already, it aligns Richard and the playgoers as auditors to disorderly music. Second, as a soliloquy, it hints at access to the monarch’s private thoughts. It is common for critics to see this as a means to heighten audience investment in Richard and thus to make his imminent, violent death more poignant. But even that seemingly final moment is not the end of the audience’s encounters with the king. Richard returns, sort of, in the last moments of the play. His return is implicit, his body supposedly located within the coffin that Exton and his men convey to the stage in the play’s final scene.30 Playgoers are confronted here with a prop. Bert States argues that on Shakespeare’s stage

objects are of little interest to them [the characters]; or when they become interesting, as the recorder and the skull do to Hamlet, or the joint stool to Lear, the character invariably sees through the thing itself, via a metaphor, leaving it, so to speak, with one foot in reality and the other in some vaster symbolic realm.

(States 1985: 60)

As a stage object, a coffin is, like Yorick’s skull, a material index of death, and an easy thing to appropriate to muse upon death more abstractly. As a prop, the coffin stands with one foot in the represented reality as the thing it is supposed to be, a container for Richard’s body, and with another foot in some symbolic realm that helps prompt Bolingbroke in his final lines to contemplate the state of his soul. But I think the encounter here that is more interesting to examine is that between the audience and the coffin, which, when brought out on stage, is probably empty. Audience members eager for another encounter with Richard might strain to see him in the box, crane their necks or stand on tip toe to get a look at an almost certainly blank wooden cover for a vacant case. In this instance, when the audience “sees through the thing itself”—through the coffin to Richard’s body—they “see” only what they can imagine. I would adapt States’s formula in this instance to say that, in addition to its literal and symbolic meanings, the coffin points also to the absence of a body; the signifying body of the player posing as Richard, and the absence of the historical Richard himself. As a spectacle, the coffin creates more feelings of narrative incompleteness; it emphasizes that the desire for access to the past can only result in a sharper sense of its remove.

In his reference to the coffin as a “bier,” Bolingbroke brings a hint of the ceremonial to the end of the play, as though the scene has shifted to a kind of funeral for Richard. The opportunity for communal mourning that could include the audience is closed off, however. Bolingbroke’s language in his final lines is initially ambiguous in its direction at those on stage and those in the theater. He says “Lords, I protest, my soul is full of woe,” and “Come, mourn with me for what I do lament,” words that open out into the crowd. But his final couplet excludes playgoers: “March sadly after, grace my mournings here / In weeping after this untimely bier” (5.6.45, 47, 51–52). Playgoers cannot follow “sadly after” the players and the coffin as they move offstage to grace the king’s presence with their mourning. To turn again to Love’s Labour’s Lost, that play closes with a blunt announcement that makes the divergent paths of players and playgoers explicit: “You that way; we this way” (1.1.52.931). King Henry and his court are removing themselves to an unseen, exclusive place outside the play’s frame of representation in which to mourn for Richard, leaving playgoers, again, in a state of suspension, perhaps even with an instinctive desire to move their bodies and follow the king and his entourage off stage. Bolingbroke’s gesture of exclusion in the play’s closing lines is, to borrow a musical figure from States, Richard II’s final “unresolved chord” (States: 1985: 205).

If Richard II is, as I have argued, “discomfortable,” this does not mean that discomfort has stolen the place normally accorded to pleasure or intellectual enlightenment in the theater. My attempt to trace a dramaturgy of discomfort here is not meant to subordinate the entire play to this feeling, but to offer, in the key of a weak theory, some affect-oriented performance criticism that deals in “local theories” and “nonce taxonomies” about various aspects of the play. To conclude that it is full of uncomfortable moments is merely to acknowledge that part of its peculiar power may derive from its ability to unsettle, on a very basic level, the minds and bodies of its audience. I would argue that this absence of fulfillment, on a visceral level, as much as the play’s ideological thickness and emotional complexity, have activated the turn to strong theory to make sense of its surplus of signification. But such readings, illuminating as many have been, can only account for so much in their attempts to account for so much. They cannot, I think, fully explain why Shakespeare lingers over the fallout from Richard II some four years after its composition and performance, surely confident that he can wring more theatrical intensity out of the allusion. In Henry V he includes an important speech in which the king of the later play must haggles with God over whether he has done enough to settle his family’s debt to the legacy of the deposed king of the earlier play. Shakespeare can heighten the tension of Henry’s agony before Agincourt because audiences still feel, along with Bolingbroke’s son, the lack of being done with Richard.

Notes
1 See Forker 1998: 46–54 for an overview of theoretical approaches to the play. The critical tradition of the play is too exhaustive to summarize, but for representatives of the “schools” named here, see, respectively, de Sousa 1988, McMillan 1984, Kastan 1986, and Menon 2003.
2 The first statement is Sedgwick quoting Silvan Tomkins. The second is from Sedgwick herself. Sedgwick is interested in weak V. strong theory as part of her
discussion of affect theory, and ultimately as part of a turn to "reparative" reading that could counter-balance the more "paranoid" reading practices she sees as being dominant in academia. I am adapting some terms from her work on this subject to think about affect analysis rather than the reparative reading aspect of her project.

3 Sedgwick develops her ideas about weak theory through her intense engagement with the psychologist and theorist Tompkins's multi-volume opus, *Affect Imagery Consciousness*.

4 Theater is, of course, etymologically a "seeing place." "Discomfortable" is Richard's term for Aumerle at 3.2.36. *Richard II* will be cited in this chapter from the Folger 2002 Arden 3 edition. Other quotations from Shakespeare taken from Evans 1997. For a different kind of audience-response analysis of the play, see Raacke 1985.

5 For a sense of the startlingly wide range such criticism can take, see Alitck 1997 and Siemon 2002. Both of these authors are certainly aware of, and from time to time explore, the theatrical dimension of their analyses, but it is not the thrust of their respective projects. Booth 1977 offers a formalist-theatrical approach that maps how spoken language in the theater can have the kinds of effects upon spectators that I am exploring here. Booth argues that Shakespeare’s manipulation of speech patterns is "an auxiliary factory in generating the subtly pervasive moral unreasons audiences and critics feel about themselves as they think back on the ways their minds have behaved during Richard II." 101.


8 Worthen is riffing here on the work of Michael Goldman, but it is a point that Worthen has himself been at pains to demonstrate through his own writing on performance for many years. For a fuller genealogy of the sort of performance theory that informs my approach, see Worthen 2010 for a survey of the field, 35-93.

9 Mark Van Doren 1939: 69-70, long ago pointed out also how often the word "tongue"—which emphasizes the *mucous* of speech—is used in the play to describe acts of articulation. See also Alitck 1997: 350-51. The use of breath to mean spoken words, or of the verb "breathe" to describe speaking, occurs at least ten times in the play, while other iterations of the terms are related to speech and the act of articulation. See 1.3.153, 1.3.173, 1.3.215, 1.3.257, 2.1.1, 1.2.8, 3.2.56, 3.3.33, 3.4.82, 4.1.210; an "adjacent" uses of the word to ambiguously mean breathing and speaking is found at 2.1.3.

10 Berger 1989: 150 notes that Shakespeare may not have wanted his audiences to "consume" and "digest" his works fully in the theater.

11 Berger 1989: 149-56 begins to consider the audience in more earnest, and to stimulating effect, in his epilogue.

12 The others are 1 and 3 Henry VI, and King John. See Brian Vickers's table "Percentage Distribution of Prose in Shakespeare’s Plays," reprinted as Appendix A in Wright 1988.

13 Forker 2002: 57.

14 See Appendix B in Wright 1988 for specific variations in Richard II.

15 Here are other instances in Richard II in which speakers move into couples in unusual ways (that is, in the middle of speeches and exchanges, and generally places other than the last two lines of a particular utterance or of a scene). Especially odd are moments, marked here with an *, where this involves one speaker picking up on this pattern from another. Some of these instances are hard to map precisely because they involve interruptions of couples within the middle of speeches that might last for only two lines, then skip one, and begin again, as in York’s speech at 2.1.17-30 words between Bolingbroke and Northumberland at
Works Cited