Several studies dealing with the figurative language in Richard II testify to the richness and complexity of the imagery in this drama. In 1935 Caroline Spurgeon observed that in Richard II “The repeated use of the verbs plant, pluck, crop, wither . . . shows how continually the picture of a garden is in Shakespeare’s mind.” In addition to garden imagery, “the ideas of birth and generation, also of inheritance from father to son” recur and undoubtedly increase “the effects of Nemesis, of cause and effect, of tragedy as the inevitable result of deeds done and in no way to be avoided.”1 Mark Van Doren has since described and explained what he considers the dominant image in Richard II—a complex of references to tongue, breath, speech, and language. “There can be no question as to Shakespeare’s affection for the hero . . . But he has not made a great man of him. He has made a poet . . . The subject of Richard II is the reign and deposition of an English king. It is also the beauty of the English language considered as an instrument upon which music can be made.”2 Wolfgang Clemen, on the other hand, feels that “the King’s . . . attitude toward words” serves “him as a sort of substitute for reality.”3 R. J. Dorius has noted “several strands of imagery” including, among others, “those of . . . the garden . . . the farm and death.”4 Richard D. Altick, stressing the variety and complexity of the imagery in Richard II, enumerates several interrelated images. In addition to those already mentioned, he cites the repeated references to earth, snakes and venom, the crucifixion, and blood. He identifies these and other images and motifs and describes as well the special quality of the imagery in Richard II:

There is no extended passage of the text which is not tied in with the rest of the play by the occurrence of one or more of the familiar symbols.

2 Mark Van Doren, Shakespeare (New York, 1939), pp. 68–69.
At certain crucial points of the action, a large number of unifying image-threads appear almost simultaneously, so that our minds are virtually flooded with many diverse yet closely related ideas.

These critics obviously differ; yet their views are rather more complementary than mutually exclusive. In fact, it is my intention to show that all these images are related to each other as parts of a larger design, notwithstanding the conclusion of Altick that Shakespeare in this drama has not yet achieved “the ultimate condensation and compression of a universe of meaning into a single bold metaphor.” It is the search for such a “bold metaphor” to which I invite the reader.

The nature of the metaphor we are seeking is indicated by the religious overtones noted by many critics. According to Kenneth Muir the play shows that “Shakespeare was steeped in the teaching of the homilies.” J. Dover Wilson sees Richard as a “type and exemplar of royal martyrdom,” feels that the play should be played throughout as a ritual, and makes the remarkable suggestion that it has something in common with the “Catholic service of the Mass.” Peter Ure sees the deposition scene and the events immediately thereafter as Richard’s Christ-like “passion.” Leo Kirschbaum, J. A. Bryant, Jr., Lotte Schmetz, and Richmond Noble have all commented on Shakespeare’s allusions to the Bible, the most important of which are references to the stories of Adam, Eve, the Garden of Eden, Cain and Abel. It is in fact these earliest Biblical narratives that I wish to suggest as the source of the “bold metaphor” from which most of the imagery in Richard II is derived. Since I hope to show that these stories contributed much more substantially to the shape and texture of Richard II than has previously been demonstrated, I must discuss them in some detail.

Distinctive and striking as a literary technique is the repetition of narrative pattern in the first chapters of Genesis. Parallels between the stories of Adam and Cain can be stated as follows: Both were warned by

---

God—Adam against eating the forbidden fruit, and Cain against letting his own sinful tendencies overcome him. Despite God’s warnings each man sinned, and after his sin each tried to evade God’s justice—Adam hid and when God called tried first to deceive Him and then to blame Eve; Cain when confronted by God lied. Adam and Cain were both punished by expulsion and by a curse against the fertility of the soil:

Also to Adam he said . . . cursed is the earth for thy sake. . . . Thorns also, and thistles shall bring for thee. . . .

Then the Lord said unto Kain. . . . Now therefore thou art cursed from the earth. . . . When thou shalt till the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength. . . .

These structural parallels, striking in themselves, also function to call attention to the important differences between Adam and Cain. Cain’s bloody fratricide is more repugnant than Adam’s disobedience; and whereas Adam simply tried to hide from God, Cain lied and confronted God arrogantly: “Am I my brothers Keeper?” The conduct of Cain shows a worsening in the relationship between man and God which continues chronologically through the account of Lamech, a shadowy descendant of Cain, and culminates in the general depravity that brought about the flood.8 The evil that began with the fall of man and the loss of the garden spread through the world and corrupted the race of men so that God destroyed all mankind except the family of Noah, who had “found grace in the eyes of the Lord” (Gen. 6:8).

A second characteristic of the literary style of the first chapters of Genesis is brevity. The account of Adam and Eve, which Milton expanded to twelve books, is told in about a thousand words. Genesis 4 tells of the birth of Cain and Abel, their occupations, their sacrifices to the Lord, God’s warning to Cain, and Cain’s subsequent murder of Abel, God’s punishment of Cain, and finally God’s warning to those who might kill Cain—all this in fifteen verses, about four hundred words. Because of this brevity and also because these elemental stories describe the begin-

---

7 I have used the University of Wisconsin Press facsimile of the 1560 edition of the Geneva Bible (1969), though Noble has pointed out (p. 61) that Shakespeare’s Bible has not been positively identified. The notes in the Arden edition and the Signet Classics edition on “Golgotha” (IV.i.144) incorrectly identify the reading “dead men’s skulls” as that of the Bishops’ Bible. It is the Geneva Bible reading.

8 Most of Lamech’s story is given in a cryptic poem which seems to mean that Lamech killed “a young man,” Tubal-Cain, who was Lamech’s son, for wounding him. In the poem, Lamech says in effect, Cain may have been protected by God’s threat of sevenfold vengeance, but I have metal weapons which are seventy-seven times as good: “If Kain shal be avenged sevenfole, truly Lamech, seventine times seve olde” (4:24).
nings of things, details stand out and acquire a symbolic importance.\(^9\)

When we look at \textit{Richard II} we can see that both its structure and imagery reveal the influence of the Genesis narratives. We shall see that Shakespeare transformed specific concrete details found in Genesis into recurrent and interrelated motifs, themes, and images. At the same time he capitalized on the general structural similarities between the Genesis narrative and the narrative of his history as he received it from Holinshed, who had in turn borrowed it from Edward Halle. In Edward Halle’s view Bolingbroke’s usurpation constituted an offense, not only against Richard but against God as well, since by the divine sanction of kings Richard was the Lord’s anointed. As seen by Halle, Bolingbroke’s usurpation, a kind of original sin, brought a curse on England that manifested itself in the chaos of civil wars and finally the widespread depravity of the reign of Richard III.\(^10\) Although Shakespeare’s references to Genesis show that he saw such similarities, his Biblical allusions are anything but simple and direct. They certainly do not establish one-to-one relationships. His analogy between English history and the Genesis narrative is so fluid that Richard, for example, as J. A. Bryant, Jr., has pointed out, sometimes appears as an Adam figure, in another context is likened to Cain, and finally presents himself as a martyred Christ.\(^{11}\)

The play is scarcely one hundred lines old before we have a notable example of the complexity of Biblical allusion in \textit{Richard II}. Bolingbroke accuses Mowbray of Gloucester’s death, claiming that Mowbray,

\(^9\) Erich Auerbach, \textit{Mimesis}, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), Ch. I. In other parts of the Bible the style is quite different. In the David story, for example, details are much less symbolic since the history is told at length with an abundance of circumstantial detail and a host of minor characters. It is about twenty-five times as long as the Adam story, and Peele in \textit{David and Bethsabe} used only a fraction of his source.


\(^{11}\) Although I agree with Bryant’s view (pp. 422–23) that Richard is an Adam-Cain-Christ figure, his conclusion that this ambiguity stems from Shakespeare’s difficulty in passing a decisive judgment on Richard (and on Bolingbroke) is hard to accept. Ernst Kantorowicz in \textit{The King’s Two Bodies} (Princeton, 1957) has shown that the “legal fiction” of the king’s body natural and the King’s body politic may well have contributed to this ambiguity but not to doubt in passing judgment. Acting in the king’s body natural, Richard, in divesting himself of the kingship, was actually guilty of an act of treason against the King’s body politic. For this he is surely to be blamed. Kantorowicz’s treatment of the play in reference to this legal commonplace seems especially relevant in that the two “bodies” of the king, natural and politic, are analogous—perhaps even derive from—the conception of the dual nature of Christ as simultaneously human and divine (see Chs. I and II).
... like a traitor coward,
Sluic'd out his innocent soul through streams of blood,
Which blood, like sacrificing Abel's, cries
Even from the tongueless caverns of the earth
To me for justice and rough chastisement. (I.i.102-106)

This speech, though ostensibly intended to incriminate Mowbray, is in
truth Bolingbroke's only slightly veiled attack on his cousin Richard, who
was indeed ultimately responsible for the murder of the Duke of
Gloucester. By likening Gloucester's death to Abel's he equates Glouces-
ter's murderer with Cain, but since Cain's sin was the shedding of his
own family's blood, the allusion is not meaningful when directed to
Mowbray. For Richard, however, who authorized the murder of Glouces-
ter (his blood relative), the allusion, as Leo Kirschbaum has pointed
out, is far more apt. By referring to Genesis we can see in this same
speech a further irony unintended by Bolingbroke. God reserves to Him-
self the punishment of Cain and curses those who would murder him.
"Douteles whosoever slayeth Kain, he shalbe punished seven folde."
Bolingbroke in his expressed desire to mete out "justice and rough
chastisement" to the Cain-like murderer of Gloucester is risking God's
curse for his presumption by taking upon himself the administration of
justice appropriate only for God. That this is Shakespeare's view is made
clear in the following scene, in which Gaunt, though convinced that
Richard is guilty of Gloucester's death, refuses to seek revenge and
declares instead, "God's is the quarrel" (I.ii.37).

The play opens with this reference to the murder of Abel by Cain and
closes with it. In the last lines Exton, who hopes to be rewarded by
Bolingbroke for the murder of Richard, says, "From your own mouth, my
lord, did I this deed," to which Bolingbroke, though admitting that he
"did wish him dead," answers,

12 Here and throughout I quote from the Arden edition.
13 Kirschbaum, p. 140. Bryant writes (p. 429) that "Bolingbroke does not realize
... that his condemnation and threat of revenge, hurled at the innocent Mowbray,
are applicable only to Richard." I believe that Bolingbroke realizes perfectly well
that through Mowbray he is attacking Richard. In I.i Gaunt and the Duchess of
Gloucester speak of Richard's guilt as fact, as does York (II.ii.100-102). A. P. Ros-
siter (p. 33) has suggested that the text of Woodstock is quite clear with regard to
the details of the murder of Gloucester (and of other matters), but that Richard II
is not. True, but Richard II is by no means wholly confusing. If the exchange be
tween Bolingbroke and Mowbray leaves us in doubt, that doubt is immediately re-
solved in the following scene in which the private exchange between Gaunt and the
Duchess convincingly condemns Richard. The audience does not learn all the details
of the murder but learns the important fact that Richard was guilty. Rossiter has
written (p. 30), "If we look at Richard II, taking it as it comes (as an audience
must), we find" that not everything is made clear. But surely many of Shakespeare's
audience were adequately acquainted with the history so that they did not have to
take "it as it comes."
The guilt of conscience take thou for thy labour,  
But neither my good word nor princely favour;  
With Cain go wander through the shades of night.  
(V.vi.37–43)

The allusion is ironic in somewhat the same way as Bolingbroke's earlier speech. In leading Exton to murder Richard, Bolingbroke is himself guilty of spilling his family's blood so that his Cain reference, which is not apt for Exton, can appropriately apply only to himself. And in his last words he again unwittingly suggests a parallel between himself and wandering Cain: "I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land, / To wash this blood off from my guilty hand" (V.v.49–50).

The play opens and closes with Bolingbroke's ironic references to Cain. In the third act, explicit references link the setting (the Duke of York's garden) not only to Adam's garden but also to Richard's England, a "sea-walled garden." The Queen listens unobserved until the Gardener declares to one of his two servants,

Bolingbroke

Hath seized the wasteful king. O, what pity is it  
That he hath not so trimm'd and dress'd his land  
As we this garden!  
(III.iv.54–57)

The Queen, coming forward, reveals her presence and speaks bitterly to the Gardener:

Thou, old Adam's likeness, set to dress this garden,  
How darest thou har'sh rude tongue sound this unpleasing news?  
What Eve, what serpent, hath suggested thee  
To make a second fall of cursed man?  
(III.iv.73–76)

Like most Biblical allusions in Richard II the reference is ironic because it is not the Gardener who is making (that is, representing) a "second fall of cursed man." He is dressing his garden as he should and as Adam was charged to do. It is Richard who has been a bad gardener to England, "this other Eden, demi-paradise" (II.i.42), as Gaunt had called it, and imagery to be discussed later emphasizes how poorly Richard has "trimm'd and dress'd his land." The Biblical Adam was cursed with the distortion of the earth's fertility, and as the Queen leaves the garden she similarly curses the gardener: "for telling me these news of woe, / Pray God the plants thou graff'tst may never grow" (III.iv.100–101). This good Gardener, however, rather than fearing the efficacy of her curse, remarks with compassion after she has left,

Poor Queen, so that thy state might be no worse,  
I would my skill were subject to thy curse. . . .  
Rue, even for ruth, here shortly shall be seen,  
In the remembrance of a weeping queen.  
(III.iv.102–107)
One might say a weeping Eve about to be expelled from Eden. These direct allusions to the stories of Cain and Abel, of Adam, Eve, and the Garden of Eden, tell us that Shakespeare wrote *Richard II* with the first narratives of Genesis in mind. The texture of the play as well as the structure reveals the influence. Certain concrete details from the same Biblical context reappear in *Richard II*, where they are expanded to form the following image clusters: blood, exile, speech, the serpent, and, last, a large sprawling, complex image that relates plant-life, gardening, the earth, fertility, birth and inheritance—images, which, as I see them, are all related and can be shown to be subordinate parts of a single image-complex. These five categories include most of the images discussed by Spurgeon, Van Doren, Altick, Dorius, and Clemen.

*Blood*, the first of these five image clusters, is introduced in the speech of Bolingbroke (quoted above) in which he likens the Duke of Gloucester’s death to the murder of Abel. Peter Ure points out in his note in the Arden edition that in Holinshed and Woodstock Gloucester was murdered by suffocation. Shakespeare’s change to decapitation makes possible his reference to Abel’s blood crying from the earth. Thereafter *blood* appears frequently—often with *earth* and the effect of bloodshed on the earth’s fertility as in the source passage in Genesis.

The voice of thy brothers blood cryeth unto me from the ground. Now therefore thou art cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brothers blood from thine hand. When thou shalt till the grounde, it shall not henceforth yeeld unto thee her strength.

Cain’s fratricide and this description of its effects are appropriate as a source for the imagery of civil war. Richard stops the trial by combat “For that our kingdom’s earth should not be soil’d / With that dear blood which it hath fostered” (I.iii.125–26), and banishes Mowbray and Bolingbroke in the futile hope of preventing civil war that “Might from our quiet confines fright fair peace, / And make us wade even in our kindred’s blood” (I.iii.137–38). In his last speech, after Exton has given him a fatal wound, Richard describes his own murder in terms of earth and blood: “Exton, thy fierce hand / Hath with the King’s blood stain’d the King’s own land” (V.v.109–10) Here Richard resembles Abel, as Bryant has pointed out, and the identification is confirmed by this imagery of earth stained with blood.

The prominence of blood imagery can be gauged by its frequency, and the word blood occurs more often in *Richard II* than in any of the other plays except *King John*. *Abel’s blood*, as a concrete detail, seems to

---

14 Bryant, p. 433.
15 *Blood* occurs 44 times in *King John*, 38 in *Richard II*. If one includes such re-
have kindled Shakespeare’s virtuosity and inspired an entire image complex so expansive that parts of it bear little resemblance to their source in the Biblical narratives. (As we shall see, this is also the case with the other images which I consider to be generated by details of the Adam and Cain stories.) For example, in the following speech by Mowbray to Bolingbroke blood has both its literal meaning and the figurative meaning of anger: “The blood is hot that must be cooled for this” (I.i.51). And Richard, one hundred lines later in an imaginative but typically ineffectual speech, urges the two enemies to “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.  

(I.i.153–57)

Later upon hearing of the defection of the Welsh army, he ingeniously explains his pallor with the words,

But now the blood of twenty thousand men  
Did triumph in my face, and they are fled;  
And till so much blood thither come again,  
Have I not reason to look pale and dead?  

(III.ii.76–79)

The imagery of exile, pilgrimage, banishment, and wandering, though less pervasive than the imagery of blood, occurs often and should remind us that both Adam and Cain as part of their punishment were driven out. These words taken as a group occur more frequently in Richard II than in any other Shakespearean play.16 Here, as is often the case in Shakespeare, the figurative expression appears in close conjunction with the literal fact. Bolingbroke, on the occasion of the trial by combat, foreshadows his fate before there is any hint that he will literally be sent out of the country:

... Mowbray and myself are like two men  
That vow a long and weary pilgrimage;  
Then let us take a ceremonious leave  
And loving farewell of our several friends.  

(I.iii.48–51)

After Richard at the last moment stops the trial by combat and then at length sentences both knights to banishment, Bolingbroke uses the image in another figurative sense.

16 Including the related words of exiled, banish, banished, wander, and wandered, these words occur 39 times in Richard II; next are Romeo and Juliet, 29; and Coriolanus, 22.
Norfolk . . .
By this time, had the King permitted us,
One of our souls had wand’rd in the air,
Banish’d this frail sepulchre of our flesh,
As now our flesh is banish’d from this land—
Confess thy treasons ere thou fly the realm;
Since thou hast far to go, bear not along
The clogging burthen of a guilty soul.

Mowbray, using the same image, retorts,

No, Bolingbroke, if ever I were traitor,
My name be blotted from the book of life,
And I from heaven banish’d as from hence!
But what thou art, God, thou, and I do know. (I.iii.193–204)

The last fifty lines of the scene, an exchange between Bolingbroke and Gaunt, deal almost exclusively with the nature of banishment. Richard, in the next act, on hearing of Gaunt’s death says unfeelingly, “His time is spent, our pilgrimage must be” (II.i.154). And after Bolingbroke’s return to England from France (II.iii) we are not permitted to forget that he was banished:

Why have those banish’d and forbidden legs
Dar’d once to touch a dust of England’s ground? (II.iii.89–90)

Thou art a banish’d man . . . (II.iii.109)

As I was banish’d, I was banish’d Herford. (II.iii.112)

Eating the bitter bread of banishment. (II.i.21)

Such reiteration of both the literal and the figurative meanings focuses our attention on this image, and the last lines of the play establish the fact that Shakespeare saw as similar, banishment in Genesis and in the historical context of his play. As we have already seen, Bolingbroke banished the murderer Exton with the command, “With Cain go wander through the shades of night” (V.vi.43).

Speech imagery calls attention to the miasma of deceit, evasion, and hypocrisy that permeates the play. In Genesis 2–4 most speeches, with the exception of God’s, reveals that here also deceit, evasion, and hypocrisy are more basic to the narrative than one might at first recall. Adam, as I noted earlier, attempted to evade God and explained unconvincingly that he hid “because I was naked,” and then blamed Eve, “the woman which thou gavest to be with me.” Cain lied outright and then asked God his notorious question. Eve’s evasion was to blame the Serpent, and the Serpent’s speech (earlier in the narrative, of course) is a mixture of lies and flattery.

The commentary printed in the margin of the Geneva Bible calls attention to this abuse of language. The Serpent’s speech is referred to as
an example of “Satan’s chiefest subtiltie,” and the reader is referred to 2 Corinthians 11:3 with its Christian application of the same passage: “But I feare lest as the serpent beguiled Eve through his subtiltie, so your mindes shulde be corrupte from the simplicitie that is in Christ.” In Adam’s speeches, his “hypocrisie” & lack of true repentance” are noted as is the fact that Eve “Instead of confessing her sinne ... increaseth it by accusing the serpent.” Arnold Williams in his summary of Renaissance exegesis shows that this emphasis on the abuse of language in Genesis 2–4 was common in interpretation.17

In the opening lines of Richard II the King remarks to Mowbray and Bolingbroke, who have declared loyalty to Richard while charging each other with treason,

We thank you both, yet one but flatters us,  
As well appeareth by the cause you come,  
Namely, to appeal each other of high treason. (I.i.25–27)

Charges, countercharges, and claims to knightly honor and integrity follow, expressed with formality in high rhetoric and resounding oaths. Mowbray uses tongue as an image when he counters Bolingbroke’s attack:

Let not my cold words here accuse my zeal.  
’Tis not the trial of a woman’s war,  
The bitter clamor of two eager tongues,  
Can arbitrate the cause betwixt us twain. (I.i.47–50)

But having disclaimed rhetoric, Mowbray continues in a style quite as rhetorical as Bolingbroke’s. Bolingbroke in a representative bit of fustian and bluster refuses reconciliation with Mowbray and uses tongue simultaneously as literal fact and figure of speech:

... Ere my tongue  
Shall wound my honour with such feeble wrong,  
Or sound so base a parle, my teeth shall tear  
The slavish motive of recanting fear,  
And spit it bleeding in his high disgrace,  
Where shame doth harbour, even in Mowbray’s face. (I.i.190–95)

The following scene, a private exchange between Gaunt and the Duchess of Gloucester, reveals what was hidden in scene i, and in doing so exposes the pretentious rhetoric that had been used there to conceal the truth.

In Act IV Bagot, Aumerle, and four other lords make accusations, denials, and threats which parallel those in the first scene where Boling-

broke confronted Mowbray. Again bold-faced and arrogant lies are couched in pompous and elaborate diction:

\[
\text{. . . Dishonourable boy,} \\
\text{That lie shall lie so heavy on my sword} \\
\text{That it shall render vengeance and revenge} \\
\text{Til thou, the lie-giver, and that lie do lie} \\
\text{In earth. (IV.i.65–69)}
\]

Altick, in commenting on the speech imagery, has written, “That words are mere conventional sounds molded by the tongue, and reality is something else again, is constantly on the minds of all the characters. . . . Richard II is unique in this insistence upon the concept of speech; that the word tongue occurs here oftener than in any other play is but one indication.”19 Van Doren, as we have seen, concludes that the subject of the play is “the beauty of the English language.”20 The frequency of such words as oath, bond, attainder, appeal, false, swear, forswear, troth, flattery, suggest (in the sense of tempt or incite), slander, and lies has more to do with deceit than with beauty, and in view of the direct allusions to Adam, Eve, Cain, and the Serpent it is not too much to believe that Shakespeare as he wrote Richard II remembered that Adam, Eve, Cain, and the Serpent lied and otherwise abused language, as did several characters in his historical source.

Serpent imagery, the third of the large image clusters, is by its nature closely related to this misuse of language. “The snake-venom motif,” Altick has pointed out, “links the idea of the garden on the one hand (for what grossly untended garden would be without its snakes?) and the idea of the tongue on the other.”21 In the terse Biblical narrative the Serpent’s role is brief but decisive: He “was more subtil than anie beast,” and with his lies and flattery he brought about the fall of man. In Richard II flattery and bad advice are cited as a principal cause of Richard’s failure, and his favorites, Bushy, Bagot, and Green, who are responsible for that bad advice, are often characterized by serpent imagery. The most interesting examples occur in the context of Bolingbroke’s unauthorized return from exile and Richard’s consequent return from Ire-

18 The word lies occurs more often in Richard II than in any of the other plays. If one considers also the occurrences of lie, liest, lieth, lying, and liar, Richard II (with 29) falls behind Romeo and Juliet (which has 33). The fact, obvious in the quotation above, that lie has two meanings and may well be used as a pun would complicate this point if it were a matter for complete statistical accuracy; instead I wish to point out only that the frequency of the word is indicative of the theme of deceit and the abuse of language.
19 Altick, p. 350.
20 Van Doren, p. 68.
21 Altick, p. 351.
land. On the coast of Wales Richard addresses the earth affectionately (not to say embarrassingly) "as a long-parted mother with her child" (III.i.8), and asks that "When they [Bolingbroke and the rebels] from thy bosom pluck a flower / Guard it, I pray thee, with a lurking adder" (III.i.19–20). The speech on both literal and figurative levels is all too characteristic. To hope that snakes will attack Bolingbroke's forces (should they stop to pick flowers!) is, to say the least, not to deal with the problem realistically. And if on a figurative level we identify the "lurking adder" with Richard's favorites, and I believe we should, we have seen that they were not much help to the King alive, and that two of them have just been executed by Bolingbroke. Richard, who does not yet know of the executions, asks Scroop what his favorites have done to stop Bolingbroke and misunderstands the answer to mean that they have made peace with him. Using serpent imagery, he cries out against them: "O villains, vipers damn'd without redemption! / Snakes, in my heart-blood warm'd that sting my heart!" (III.ii.129–31). Richard's speech should remind us of the earlier "lurking adder / Whose double tongue may with a mortal touch / Throw death upon thy sovereign's enemies" (III.i.20–22). The "double tongue" is remarkably apt. Neither in Richard's England nor in Eden does the Serpent's "mortal touch" lie in its venom, but rather in its capacity to deceive. In the last lines of this scene Richard, in despair, rejects the attempt of Aumerle, another favorite, to encourage him: "He does me double wrong / That wounds me with the flatteries of his tongue" (III.ii.215–16). We should recall the Queen's question to the Gardener (quoted above, but occurring later in the play), "what serpent, hath suggested [i.e., tempted] thee / To make a second fall of cursed man?" (III.iv.75–76). No serpent threatened that well-dressed garden of the Duke of York, but the garden that was Richard's England was lost because "The King . . . [was] basely led / By flatterers" (II.i.241–42).

Of course, analysis of this sort may lead one to read into Richard II more of the Garden of Eden than is unmistakably there. For example, the same passage that includes the "lurking adder" (III.i.18–62) offers several other tantalizing possibilities. Are the "nettles" that Richard (an Adam figure) conjures and exhorts to sting the rebels ironically the "thorns and thistles" with which the Biblical Adam himself, not his enemies, was cursed? Or are we to see it as ironic that Richard, who like Adam was to "dress" the garden, is encouraging it to produce such an undesirable crop? Thirty lines later, when with Bolingbroke in mind

---

22 Eric LaGuardia sees Gaunt's attitude toward England as Biblical in contrast to Richard's, which he calls "magical" ("Ceremony and History: The Problem of Symbol from Richard II to Henry V," Pacific Coast Studies in Shakespeare, ed. All use subject to http://about.jstor.org/terms
he describes exposed traitors as standing “bare and trembling,” is Richard (still an Adam figure) unwittingly describing the first Adam, “bare and trembling,” trying to hide from God? When, fifteen lines further on, Richard claims to have the help of angels who will fight for him against his enemies, are these angels an ironic echo of the angels who, far from helping Adam, drove him out of Eden with a flaming sword? One may finally remind himself of those critics described by George Gascoigne as “striving to look far into a mill-stone.” And the unsympathetic reader may ask, Why all this? And precisely to what purpose?

The answer is that in Richard II Biblical allusions, echoes, and derivative imagery create a unity that one would not realize without an awareness that the play is permeated with the spirit of man’s fall and first fratricide. Pointing out these references not only reveals the unity of the drama but also underlines the flawed characters of Richard and Bolingbroke. I cannot agree with Bryant, who interprets Bolingbroke and Richard as ambiguous figures, neither good nor bad, nor with critics who see Richard as sympathetically as does Peter Ure. The action of the play condemns both Bolingbroke and Richard. A. P. Rossiter is unquestionably right in saying that though Richard is to be condemned as a bad king, Bolingbroke’s usurpation is not right, and the murder of Richard makes it “the blackest wrong.”

If, however, we see Richard II as analogous to Genesis 2–4, we recognize that the disastrous consequence of their actions for future generations is of greater moment than their personalities. This interpretation of the play is particularly well supported by the complex of interrelated images in the last important image pattern—plant-life, gardening, the earth, fertility, birth, and inheritance, images which can also be recognized as significant elements in the Biblical narrative. R. J. Dorius has noted that “images of gardening” are used to depict Richard’s mismanagement. “Though the parallels between Richard as gardener and king are developed fully only in the last scene of Act III, they are central to the meaning of the entire drama.” Earth by itself and in the form of dust, land, field, and ground appears sixteen times in the first ten verses of the story of Adam and Eve. It also plays a significant part in the imagery of Richard II. According to Altick the play is “dominated by the related words, earth, land, and ground. In no other play of Shakespeare is the complex of ideas represented by these words so tirelessly dwelt

Waldo F. McNeir and Thelma N. Greenfield [Eugene, Ore., 1966], pp. 68–89). Though his is not my interpretation, I consider his article particularly apt for this speech, III.ii.4–26.

23 Rossiter, p. 36.
24 Dorius, p. 18.
upon. In *Richard II* the three words occur a total of 71 times; in *King John*, the nearest rival, 46.\(^25\)

In the garden scene (III.iv), which illustrates so much in small of the relationship between *Richard II* and Genesis 2-4, the Queen first refers to the Gardener as “Adam’s likeness”; and then, echoing God’s creation of Adam “of the dust of the grounde,” she calls him “thou little better thing than earth” (ll. 73-78). God, cursing Adam, tells him that he will “returne to the earth: for out of it wast thou taken, because thou art dust, and to dust shalt thou returne.” Richard’s despairing speech in III.ii is a striking illustration of death seen as the return to earth of the earth that is our flesh, “that small model of the barren earth / Which serves as paste and cover to our bones” (ll. 153-54). Elsewhere the human body in *Richard II*, as in Genesis, is equated with the earth.

Less specific than these references to earth are the pervasive images of gardening. England, the “sea-walled garden,” is “disordered and her wholesome herbs / Swarming with caterpillars” (III.iv.43-47), unmistakable evidence that the garden is prey to corruption. If we recall that the King’s favorites are elsewhere described as “caterpillars of the commonwealth” (II.iii.165) we understand the threat. In another speech the Gardener likens overgrown shrubbery to overweening aristocrats:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Go thou, and like an executioner} \\
\text{Cut off the heads of too fast growing sprays,} \\
\text{That look too lofty in our commonwealth.} 
\end{align*}
\]

Later when the Duke of York admonishes his son, Aumerle (a secret conspirator against Bolingbroke), he uses a like image. The Duchess has described the favorite of the newly crowned Bolingbroke as violets and the new regime as spring, and the Duke, perhaps suspecting Aumerle’s conspiracy, adds, “Well, bear you well in this new spring of time, / Lest you be cropp’d before you come to prime” (V.ii.46-51). More often than not this garden imagery conveys a threat, a portent of imminent or impending danger. The Welsh captain notes, among other apocalyptic signs, that “The bay-trees in our country all are wither’d . . . These signs forerun the death or fall of kings” (II.iv.8-15). Of course, neither caterpillars nor bay trees are mentioned in Genesis; here as with the other images, Shakespeare has expanded and varied concrete Biblical details so that they both fill and fit the context of his English historical drama.

This practice may also be seen in the imagery of farming.

To the Renaissance Bible reader Adam was both the first gardener and the first farmer. The commentators agreed that it was Adam’s duty to care for the garden. Though, of course, his work was more arduous

\(^{25}\) Altick, p. 341 n.
after the fall and expulsion from Eden, yet from the first, dressing the plants was to be his occupation. Like Adam, Richard was charged to "dress" the Garden that is England, but he failed. Gaunt on his deathbed condemns Richard for having "leas'd out . . . [England] like to a tenement or pelting farm" (II.i.59–60), and denounces him with the words, "Landlord of England are thou now, not king" (II.i.113). Earlier Richard admitted that because of his expenses in keeping "too great a court," "We are inforc'd to farm [i.e., lease] our royal realm" (I.iv.43–45). Ross complains that because of Richard's extravagance, "The Earl of Wiltshire hath the realm in farm" (II.i.256). These references to leasing out England as a tenant farm are compatible with the imagery of earth and gardening and may also have influenced the writing of the deposition scene when Richard in a homely image compares the crown to a well with two buckets, apparently part of a rope and pulley arrangement.

Earth imagery in Richard II is also analogous in some places to the Biblical curse suffered by Adam (and Cain) in the loss of the earth's fertility. The Queen, as we have noted, echoes the Bible in her curse, "Pray God the plants thou graft'st may never grow" (III.iv.101). And the king in despair at hearing the mistaken report that "York is joined with Bolingbroke" orders his serving men dismissed:

20 Williams, pp. 109–10, 131, 140.

27 Now is this golden crown like a deep well
That owes two buckets, filling one another,
The emptier ever dancing in the air,
The other down, unseen, and full of water.
That bucket down and full of tears am I,
Drinking my griefs, whilst you mount up on high. (IV.i.183–88)

Later in the same scene, when Richard asks to leave, Bolingbroke responds, "Go some of you convey him to the Tower." And Richard cries out,

O, good! Convey! Conveyors are you all,
That rise thus nimbly by a true king's fall. (IV.i.247–48)

Conveyors is no doubt a pun meaning thieves, but the image also suggests some piece of farm equipment that operates like the buckets in the well. The OED gives such a meaning, though for a later date: "4.b. spec. Applied to various mechanical contrivances, e.g., for conveying grain, chaff, . . . or straw to another part of a barn." There are other images of political rising and falling, at least two of which may also have been suggested by farming:

. . . Their fortunes both are weigh'd;
In your lord's scale is nothing but himself,
And some few vanities that make him light.
But in the balance of great Bolingbroke,
Besides himself, are all the peers,
And with that odds he weighs King Richard down (III.iv.84–89)

and

Northumberland, thou ladder wherewithal
The mounting Bolingbroke ascends my throne. . . . (V.i.55–56)
That power I have, discharge, and let them go
To eear the land that hath some hope to grow,
For I have none. (III.ii.211–13)

In Genesis God not only curses the fertility of the earth, but also, in a very different way, the fertility of Eve. When she bears children it will be in pain. A remarkable example of Shakespeare’s use of this image occurs after Richard has left for his wars in Ireland. As the scene opens the Queen has a presentiment of evil which she expresses in imagery of fertility and birth:

Some unborn sorrow ripe in Fortune’s womb
Is coming toward me, and my inward soul
With nothing trembles. . . . (II.ii.10–13)

A few lines later, still puzzled by her own melancholy, the Queen remarks, “nothing hath begot my something grief.” Green enters with the news of an event shortly to prove disastrous, that Bolingbroke—who will soon resemble Cain—has landed; and the Queen, sensing that her fears have been fulfilled, remarks,

So Greene, thou art the midwife to my woe,
And Bolingbroke my sorrow’s dismal heir;
Now hath my soul brought forth her prodigy,
And I, a gasping new deliver’d mother,
Have woe to woe, sorrow to sorrow, join’d. (II.ii.62–66)

Shakespeare’s imagery here recalls God’s curse: “I wil greatly increase thy sorrows and thy conceptions. In sorowe shal thou bring forth the children.” As Eve brought forth Cain in sorrow, so the Queen’s “soul brought forth [Bolingbroke] in sorrow.”

In a general sense this curse against birth and generation applies also to the English nation who for almost a century will in sorrow bear children to inherit a land cursed by the actions described in this play.28 The Bishop of Carlisle denounces the usurpation particularly for the sorrow it will bring to “future ages”:

If you crown him [Bolingbroke], let me prophesy—
The blood of English shall manure the ground,

28 For imagery of England as mother note the following:

Then England’s ground farewell; sweet soil adieu;
My mother and my nurse that bears me yet!
Where’er I wander, boast of this I can:
Though banished, yet a true-born Englishman. (I.iii.305–308)

and

This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,
This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings. . . . (II.i.50–51)
And future ages groan for this foul act,
... tumultuous wars
Shall kin with kin, and kind with kind, confound.
Disorder, horror, fear, and mutiny,
Shall here inhabit...
It will the woefullest division prove
That ever fell upon this cursed earth.
Prevent it, resist it, let it not be so,
Lest child, child’s children, cry against you woe.

(IV.i.136–49)

This speech expresses what I consider the basic concept both in Genesis and in Richard II, that of a curse visited upon a land and a race of men. Earlier in the play, Richard on the walls of Flint Castle confronts and rebukes Northumberland; his speech, similarly exploiting the concept of a divine curse, foreshadows England’s future:

... know, my master, God omnipotent,
Is mustering in his clouds, on your behalf,
Armies of pestilence, and they shall strike
Your children yet unborn, and unbegot
That lift your vassal hands against my head,
And threat the glory of my precious crown.

His speech concludes with another ingenious combination of blood and plant imagery while maintaining the theme of the consequences for England’s “mothers’ sons” of what is about to happen:

Tell Bolingbroke... that
... ere the crown he looks for live in peace,
Ten thousand bloody crowns of mothers’ sons
Shall ill become the flower of England’s face,
Change the complexion of her maid-pale peace
To scarlet indignation and bedew
Her pastures’ grass with faithful English blood.

(III.iii.84–100)

By “ten thousand bloody crowns” Richard is perhaps referring (quite unrealistically) to loyal subjects who would die for him; Shakespeare’s audience, however, was free to think of the generations of disputed rule and civil war to follow.

Many other passages, while not stating the concept of an inherited curse, stress the importance of inheritance. Such a passage is the one in which Bolingbroke attempts to justify his return to England to the Duke of York:

You are my father, for methinks in you
I see old Gaunt alive. O then my father,
Will you permit that I shall stand condemn’d
A wandering vagabond, my rights and royalties
Pluck’d from my arms perforce, and given away
To upstart unthrifts? Wherefore was I born?
If that my cousin be King in England,
It must be granted I am Duke of Lancaster.
. . . I lay my claim
To my inheritance of free descent. (II.iii.116–35)

Addressed as it is to York, this argument has an especial appeal since it is essentially the same as York’s earlier speech (II.i.189–99) in which he tried to dissuade Richard from seizing Bolingbroke’s property.

Mowbray preparing for the trial by combat swears by “my succeeding issue” (I.iii.20). Bolingbroke, in the same scene, greets his father, “O thou, the earthly author of my blood” (I.iii.69). Ross describes Bolingbroke as “Bereft, and gelded of his patrimony” (II.i.237). Bolingbroke anticipates the time that his “infant fortune comes to years” (II.iii.66). Reference to family blood, especially the spilling of it, and kinship abounds. The Duchess of York, while trying to stop the Duke from reporting Aumerle’s part in the plot against Bolingbroke, sees the problem (a bit hysterically) in terms of her own fertility and (could Shakespeare never resist it?) her fidelity:

Have we more sons? Or are we like to have?
Is not my teeming date drunk up with time?
And wilt thou pluck my fair son from mine age
And rob me of a happy mother’s name?
Is he not like thee? Is he not thine own? (V.ii.90–94)

As I have noted earlier, Miss Spurgeon wrote that “the ideas of birth and generation also of inheritance from father to son . . . [were] a good deal in Shakespeare’s mind . . . and the recurrence of these images undoubtedly increases the effect of Nemesis, of cause and effect, of tragedy as the inevitable result of deeds done and in no way to be avoided.”29 After the deposition has become fact the Abbot of Westminster remarks, “A woeful pageant have we here beheld,” and the Bishop of Carlisle answers, “The woe’s to come; the children yet unborn / Shall feel this day as sharp to them as thorn” (IV.i.321–23). The idea that the action of this play, like the action of Genesis, will have dire consequences for future ages is suggested literally and by the imagery. To my mind, this similarity between the play and Genesis is of primary importance.

One other group of Biblical allusions call attention to themselves, however. These are for the most part in speeches by Richard later in the play. I refer to Richard’s references to Judas, Pilate, the crucifixion, and in general the sacrifice of Christ, specifically in terms of his betrayal.

29 Spurgeon, p. 238.
Richard, as God's lieutenant, had a special relationship to God. He was the Lord's anointed. But Richard sees himself as Christ about to be offered as sacrifice. He seems eager, in fact, to play such a role. With his entrance in Act IV, scene i, he remarks, "Did they not sometime cry 'All hail!' to me? / So Judas did to Christ." In the remainder of the speech Richard's identification of himself with Christ is blasphemous in its exaggeration and self-pity: "But he, in twelve, / Found truth in all but one; I, in twelve thousand, none" (ll. 169-71). Richard is by no means reluctant to present himself as a Christ-like sacrifice. He resists, however, the charge of human responsibility for his past mistakes. Northumberland demands a public reading of his crimes—a form of confession, and Richard responds with sudden dismay: "Must I do so? and must I ravel out my weav'd up follies?" (IV.i.228-29). Though willing enough to play the role of crucified Christ, he flinches at acknowledging human fallibility.

Biblical imagery then, both from Genesis and the crucifixion, reflects Shakespeare's judgment of these two kings. Rossiter has written disparagingly of Richard II that it has "no real beginning, a coherent middle, and a ragged muddled end."30 In my view the Cain-like murder of the Duke of Gloucester is a very real beginning, and a second Cain-like murder (which is also Regicide) with its anticipated curse is an ominous but not a "muddled end." Bolingbroke, who at first accused Richard of being Cain, was himself guilty of spilling his family’s blood; and for his crime the land and future generations are cursed. But Richard must be blamed as well. The chaos and civil war that followed Bolingbroke's usurpation might not have come to pass had Richard played the man instead of playing Christ.

Critics have disagreed greatly in interpreting that character of Richard. I think the center of the play is not Richard's personality, nor Bolingbroke's, nor the tension between them. The deposition, like the fall of Adam, is much more important for its future consequences than for what it tells us of the personality of the protagonist. We can understand this in the twentieth century, and Shakespeare's audience no doubt could see it much more readily.

30 Rossiter, p. 29.