

The "sacred"  
ordination of kings  
and the abuse of his  
"subjects"



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What does an author intend to convey when he repeats certain words throughout a novel or a play? William Shakespeare uses this rhetorical strategy in his famous historical play, King Richard II. The two words "sacred" and "subject" are repeated more often in this play than in any of his other works. The connotation that both of these words carry with them underscores the theme of the importance and sacred meaning in being ordained by God to be a king, and of the important duty that this role carries with it, which is to serve the people. These two themes run throughout the play, and the two terms are constantly repeated to remind the audience of their frequent violation. Early on in the play, Richard II repeatedly declares that his subjects are to be loyal and good to him, and that they will all be treated equally regardless of their status. In the first few lines from Richard, he asks John of Gaunt whether his son is coming to settle the matter with Mowbray "as a good subject should/ On some known ground of treachery in him?" (1. 1, 10-11) Richard himself, however, does not treat his subjects fairly; moreover, as we later learn, he was involved in the plot to kill his uncle, Duke of Gloucester. Richard's strong hypocrisy is foreshadowed when he tells Mowbray that even the "nearness to our sacred blood" (1. 1, 119) will not stop Richard from being fair to both parties. Murdering his uncle appears to stand in total opposition to that promise. Richard's constant repetition of the word "subject" creates a deep irony, as he makes Bullingbrook and Mowbray promise to not "plot, contrive or complot any ill/ 'Gainst us, our state, our subjects or our land" (1. 3, 198-190). This line once again reminds us of Richard's own failure to keep promises in his eventual taking of Bullingbrook's inheritance to use as funding for his war in Ireland. As John of Gaunt prophesizes before he dies, Richard's "fierce blaze of riot <https://assignbuster.com/the-sacred-ordination-of-kings-and-the-abuse-of-his-subjects/>

cannot last./ For violent fires soon burn out themselves" (2. 1, 33-4). Richard stepped over that line when he took away all of Bullingbrook's inheritance. Moreover, the word "subject" is used by Bullingbrook in his defense against York's opposition to his invasion of England. He exclaims, "I am a subject, and I challenge law" (2. 3, 132-3). After he finds out that he was robbed of his inheritance by his own king, who was supposed to protect his subjects and their interests, Bullingbrook, before one with a "subject's love"(1. 1, 31) toward Richard, returns to take back what is his and defend himself along with others for the maltreatment that their king is subjecting them to. To Richard, however, Bullingbrook – and possibly all his other subjects – are nothing but "puny subjects" (3. 2, 86) incapable of any real damage. Paradoxically, Richard incredulously asks, "Subjected thus,/ How can you say to me I am a king?" (3. 2, 175-6), although his subjugation by his own subjects is just an answer to his own abuses of power. In the play, the word "subject" is often placed next to or near the word "sacred". The main allusion of the latter word is to the ordination of the king by God. Presumably, this was the most sacred tie that the people could have to God. God, they believed, places a king on earth so that he can rule his people by divine right. The theme of God ordaining King Richard II to be the king and Bullingbrook, in his revolt, angering God permeates the play. Richard alludes to this notion of impermeable sacred power that he holds because he has been chosen by God: For well we know no hand of blood and bone, Can gripe the sacred handle of our sceptre, Unless he do profane, steal or usurp...You know: my master, God omnipotent, Is mustering.../armies of pestilence...(3. 3, 80-6) This ordination cannot be revoked by anyone but God, and to attempt to usurp the king would invoke His wrath. Another sacred element is <https://assignbuster.com/the-sacred-ordination-of-kings-and-the-abuse-of-his-subjects/>

the blood ties that hold people together. The importance of heirs and blood relations is constantly spoken of throughout the beginning of the play. The widow of the murdered duke makes an appeal to John of Gaunt based on this sacred tie that, if broken or destroyed, needs to be avenged. She pleads with Gaunt, reminding him that he and her husband were “ Edward’s seven sons, whereof thyself art one,/ Were as seven vials of sacred blood,/ Or seven fair branches springing from one root” (1. 2, 11-13). She begs him to avenge her husband, but Gaunt is closer in devotion to the sacredness of God’s choice of king and his placement on the throne. If Richard has indeed murdered the duke, God will punish him for it; Gaunt does not feel that it is his right to seek justice against the king. Furthermore, the sacred tie between Richard and his subjects has deteriorated so much that they no longer have any faith in him and instead turn to Bullingbrook as their savior. In this way, Bullingbroke moves from being a subject of a king to being a symbol of justice and order, someone who will treat his subjects with dignity and rule England fairly. As Charles Boyce points out, Richard seizes the inheritance of Bullingbrook, and this “ not only stimulates Bullingbroke’s rebellion, but it alarms many other nobles, who fear that their own holdings may similarly be in jeopardy” (535, Shakespeare A-Z). This ties in to the previously mentioned theme of the sacredness of ordination, as the subjects of the king are required to honor this God-ordained individual. While they cannot break this sacred dictate, some revolts may be in themselves God-ordained, just as the first king was put there at the beginning of the tradition of royalty. While it is true that “ The breath of worldly men cannot depose/ The deputy elected by the Lord.” (3. 2, 56-7), when this holy deputy begins to neglect and misuse the power that was bestowed upon him by God, his subjects may decide to <https://assignbuster.com/the-sacred-ordination-of-kings-and-the-abuse-of-his-subjects/>

turn away from him. Just as God placed the king on the throne, God may also revoke his rights and send another, more worthy individual to take his place: “ The deposed king had failed to serve the people, and the new king had been sent by God to do so” (539, Shakespeare A-Z). These two small words are intertwined throughout the play, underscoring the work’s two predominant themes. The sacred position of the king as the ruler of the people was thought of as a divine ordination made by God. He was not chosen by the people, nor was he approved by them. However, the people took comfort in the belief that God had chosen the king because he was intended to be a good ruler who treated his subjects with fairness and equality. King Richard II, however, proved to be inadequate as a ruler, and Bullingbrook’s rebellion against the king can be looked as something that was sent from above, and was thus not a violation of the sacredness of God’s ordination. As Northumberland says to Bullingbrook, “ First, to thy sacred state wish I all happiness” (5. 6, 6); the lines seem to drip with suspense and ambivalence. Is Bullingbrook’s new crown sanctioned by God? The question remains whether or not this was truly a God-ordained event. Richard points out by the end that this made “ Proud majesty a subject, state a peasant” (4. 1, 251). This line suggests chaos, as the two roles are not only reversed, but the old king is also murdered. Bullingbrook’s reaction to Richard’s murder is strangely ambivalent, and an ominous feeling seems to hang over the beginning of the reign of Henry IV.