

# The Qualities of a Monarch

BY C. KEVIN BARRETT

One of the two men at the back of the procession leaned over to the other and whispered. “That, my good William, is a sign of *breeding*. On the most black of days he walks with his head high, his face steadfast. That is the true quality of a monarch.”

“I will agree,” William said, “that he looks more fit than I have seen him in years, but posture alone does not make a King, my good Jonathan.”

“Of course there are other qualities to be considered,” Jonathan replied. “Did his majesty not excel at sport in his earlier years? Did he not master literature and compose music of extraordinary complexity and ability?”

William nodded.

“And did he not command respect from his adversaries, both within and outside the realm?”

William nodded again and smiled. “I think perhaps you are in love with the King, more so than even the Queen Consort Anne Boleyn.”

“Do not play me the fool, William,” Jonathan replied with a hard stare. “I am simply trying to make a point that we can agree upon.”

“I agree only that a monarch should be greater in character and ability than the people he rules. In the spirit of our discussion, however, I would suggest that there is something of greater importance.”

“And that would be what?”

“I believe we shall see that presently.”

The line plodded toward the stone steps. Two guards from the Royal House of Tudor led the procession, their posture ramrod straight. Behind them walked the Queen, head down, her dark hair bound under a simple linen coif. She wore the expression of a person who had run out of options.

Behind her walked King Henry VIII. There was no sign from the King's expression that there was anything unusual about the day, and only the fact that Queen Anne was not at his side hinted at what was to follow. Various members of Parliament followed the King, there to ensure the proceedings did not run contrary to the laws of England.

Jonathan More and William Pursley, being mere clerics, had found themselves at the very back of the procession. Their purpose was to chronicle the events that were to transpire that day, May 19, in the year of their Lord 1536.

The procession reached the stairs and began to climb. Jonathan looked toward the stone steps and shook his head.

"For May it is as hot as July," Jonathan said. "We shall all be drenched in sweat by the time this unpleasant business is over."

"Aye, we shall," William replied. "Except of course for the King. Being a monarch, he does not sweat."

"You are being facetious again," Jonathan said as they climbed. "Is this what you find so venerable, perhaps—sarcasm, wit? You have only been in the court for a few months; otherwise you would know that the King is master of these things too."

"I do not doubt your word for a moment," William said, carefully planting each foot onto the narrow steps. "There are things greater than wit to a Monarch."

"And will you not tell me what it is that you think is so important?"

"In time, my good friend."

**I**t was a relief to reach the top. Near the stone block stood King Henry VIII, Queen Consort Anne Boleyn, his guards and the priest. There would be no pronouncement that day, no speeches; everything that had needed to be said had already been said. Only the priest spoke. The crowd prevented Jonathan and William from hearing a single word.

Jonathan kept looking back, reminding himself just how close to the edge he was. William, who had little fear of heights, stood at ease and enjoyed the cool breeze.

"I hope this is over quickly," Jonathan whispered, staying mindful of where his feet were planted, "I would just as soon be off this thing."

"Patience, Jonathan. Aspire to be like

the monarch you admire so much, and exercise some of it now."

"That must be it. It is patience. That is the quality you think most essential for a King or Queen."

"And you would ascribe this to our current monarch? A man who, after being denied the right to annul his first marriage, severed ties with the Church and started his own so he could wed the woman already pregnant with his child?"

"A King must act in the best interests of the realm. How would it look to the great houses of Europe to have the child born out of wedlock?"

"It would have been no different than the bastards which litter the royal courts of France and Russia and all the Kingdoms between."

Jonathan shrugged. "It hardly matters now, not after today," he replied. "If nothing else, this day settles the matter of succession."

"Quite right," William replied. He was about to say something else when one of the Parliamentarians turned and gave him a scathing look. The two men realized how quiet it had become.

It was starting.

**T**he King turned to his wife, the expression on his face unchanged. "My only regret is that it would come to this," he said, "that perhaps there wasn't something else we could have done."

Anne Boleyn looked up at her husband and nodded almost imperceptibly. "I shall miss our arguments." Tears ran down her face, her lips trembled.

The King smiled. "Yes, so shall I, dear Anne. So shall I." He took a step toward the block. He took off his overcoat and handed it to one of his guards, then carefully unbuttoned his white undershirt. When he was finished, he lay down on the stone slab, on the spot where a thousand other men had before.

The High Priest raised the stone knife to the sky and asked for the blessings of the Gods. His servants stepped forward and took hold of the King's wrists and ankles, pressing them fast against the altar. The King did not struggle.

There was a sickening crack as the knife penetrated breastbone. No scream escaped the King's lips when the priest cut through the rib cage. Blood gushed from the wound as he severed the arteries; it

poured over the sides of the stone altar, staining the carved image of Tlaloc, the rain god, and Huitzilopochtli, god of sun, war and patron of the city.

The priest put down the knife, and using both hands, pulled the King's heart from his chest. Most of the Englishmen turned away. Two of the Parliamentarians were physically ill.

Anne Boleyn stepped forward.

The priest thrust the still beating organ into her hand. Holding her hand in his own, he raised them both toward the cloudless skies over Tenochtitlan. At the precise moment the heart beat its last, he spoke.

The first words were in Nahuatl, native language to the priest, his servants, and the masses gathered around the base of the pyramid. Then he spoke in English.

"All hail Queen Anne, royal consort to Moctezuma the Second, ruler of the great and noble Empire of the Aztec! *Gods save the queen!*"

A cheer of approval went up from the crowd, which had been instructed to cheer only when the priest had finished speaking in English. Few in Tenochtitlan had bothered to learn the language. Even people as backward as the English, they assumed, would be able to learn their tongue now that they were part of the empire. The Aztec Empire would bring prosperity to the tiny island nation, and with it, the empire would have the foothold in Europe it had so long desired.

The Queen held the organ high, the blood of her husband and former King of England running down her sleeve, his lifeless body slumped over the altar. The sadness in her eyes was gone, replaced by an expression stern and resolute.

"There," William said, pointing at the new Aztec Queen, "*That* is the stuff of a monarch."

Jonathan turned, surprised. "How can you say that? She is a cold-blooded, heartless savage like all of these people. She should be on her knees mourning the loss of her King!"

William shook his head. "Our Queen has a quality far greater than sympathy. It is the same one that turned away Moctezuma's armada, that prevented war from coming to our soil and which has kept you and I from sharing the fate of our late monarch."

"And that is?"

William turned to his companion and smiled. "The ability to compromise, dear Jonathan." ●