

The Merits of a King

A keenness of eye, a calmness of mind,
a heart unflagging, heedless of time;
a sword-arm true, swift-striking, hammer-hard;
befriended by fate, a fighter victorious:
These are the merits that make a king.

A word to the wise: beware that crowngrasper,
who gazes between glory and honor,
and sees not the difference. Sorrow will follow
he who reckons the hardest aspect
of wearing the crown is winning the crown;
he who presumes sweet words and bowing
are outward signs of inward respect;
who forsakes stately duties, to sate battleglory;
whose reason for word, or writ, or order,
too often is thus: "For I am the King!"
When holding council, he hears only those
who speak the king's mind; his subjects are only
performing bit parts, in the play of the crown.
To bear these faults is to fail as a king.

But harken to him, who holds the crown,
and finds it heavy, ere head shall bear it.
The wise and the gloried, he gathers about him,
considers their counsel, the sweet and the bitter.
His will, his might, he wields in service;
spends his strength, to serve the people,
noble and commoner, renowned or unfamed,
who reside in his realm. Reasoned, his judgments,
and evenhanded; honest, his words,
but tempered by tact; trusted to learn
from wiser men; his word is ne'er broken,

though not lightly-given. A generous man
with wealth or praise; patient with his subjects,
and kind with their cares; kindred or stranger
who flock to his banner, all blessed in his weal.
The pride which bides in his breast is not
in his own image, but in the aspect of those
who dwell in his realm, for a royal name
is only mighty when upheld by worthy
folk united. He knows full well that
honor's no gift, but earned and hard-won.
A good king is named and renowned for these things.

Heed you these words, warrior aspiring
to claim the throne. Think of the manner
you will leave your fame, the legacy of your reign.
Measure your heart, ere you make the first blow.

Written September 2008 by Dyfn ap Meurig, Pencerdd

Notes

Anglo-Saxon style poetry is alliterative style rather than a rhyming one; that is, the structure is based on repeating consonant sounds. Lines are divided into two half-lines separated by a slight pause (often shown either as an exaggerated space or two lines).

For more information, download the Anglo Saxon Poetry Guide located here:

<http://www.gemyndeseld.net/stories-by-the-hearth.html>

What is important about this poem is not that I had two or more individuals in mind as models, but that any royal readers search themselves to see which verses are mirrored within.

This piece won the kingdom bardic competition in Fall 2009. Perhaps more importantly for me, King Kenneth graciously allowed it to be performed before all the entrants at Crown List – the poem’s intended audience – in 2011.