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# Haunted By Gender: Teaching Gender Performance through Monstrosity in the Beowulf Manuscript/ The New F Words: The Importance of Failure and Frustration in AP English Classrooms

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**Haunted By Gender:  
Teaching Gender Performance through Monstrosity in the *Beowulf* Manuscript**

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**The New F Words:  
The Importance of Failure and Frustration in AP English Classrooms**

by

Allison Harmer

Starred Papers

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

Saint Cloud State University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Science

in English Education

March, 2016

Starred Paper Committee:

Glenn Davis, Chairperson

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Ask any child and he or she will quickly attest to the fact monsters are very real; they live in closets, under beds, and stalk nightmares. Luckily for children, these imaginary beasts can often be chased away with the simple expediency of turning on a light. For many adults, however, monsters are imbued with a very different, much darker sense of power. They may not be scaly, clawed beasts hiding under the bed, but they haunt people nonetheless. For this reason, monsters have roamed the pages of literature for centuries, giving voice to many of society's deepest fears. The monsters of the *Beowulf* manuscript in particular attract everyone from J.R.R. Tolkien to John Gardner because they offer so many insights into the culture which produced them. One of those insights is the way in which very real human fears can be addressed and defeated through these imaginary creatures. Dana Oswald argues that "monsters are depositories for all kinds of human fears and anxieties" and in particular, that "the nexus of many of these fears is sexuality" (8). These imaginary creatures, in other words, are manifestations of very real concerns about the nature of sexuality and gender. The manuscript's monsters served as powerful warnings to their Anglo-Saxon audience about the ways in which incorrectly performed gender can wreak havoc in a community.<sup>1</sup> While scholars will never know the motivations of the compiler of the *Beowulf* manuscript, examination of the texts presented in the manuscript, along with emerging understanding of the changes confronted by Anglo-Saxon society at the time, can nonetheless produce many insights. Most notable among those insights is the way in which gender concerns may have served as a motivator—consciously or not—in the compilation of the manuscript. Ultimately these monsters, both male and female, teach the audience how to

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<sup>1</sup>Grendel's mother's gender has routinely been debated since Chance addressed Tolkien's elision of her in his "The Monsters and The Critics." However, scholars not yet applied the same theories of gender and performativity to the manuscript as a whole. Doing so reveals fundamental concerns of Anglo-Saxon society that are certainly worthy of attention.

correctly *be* male or female. They teach the audience the importance of performing gender in socially acceptable ways and the ramifications an incorrect performance may have on the community.

## II. THEORETICAL AND HISTORICAL FRAMEWORK

Judith Butler explains that “gender reality is performative” (907). In other words, gender identity is formed through a series of acts or behaviors. Butler draws a line between gender (the identity of a person) and sex (the biological, chromosomal make up of a person); while sex is relatively immutable, at least in the eleventh century, gender is fluid. Behaviors are assigned—rather arbitrarily, according to Butler—to certain genders by society. Gender is constructed, then, through outward behaviors. These “stylized repetitions of acts” are thus deemed either acceptable or unacceptable by the society at large (900). Acceptability is largely determined by ensuring behavior, and its assigned gender, match the sex of the person performing the act. Most important—and damning—is the fact that, according to Butler, those who fail at their gender, those who perform behaviors inappropriate for their sex, are always punished by society (903). While Butler’s arguments concerning gender performativity emerged in the 1980s, the idea behind them—that society artificially genders actions and expects its members to perform these “correct” behaviors—is something quite real in Anglo-Saxon England, particularly among the warrior culture that placed a high premium on idealized visions of masculinity and femininity. As Oswald argues, monsters in general, and the ones in *Beowulf* in particular, serve “as a kind of predecessor for Butler’s notions of performativity and iteration” (10). Thus Butler provides a useful language with which to discuss the ways in which the monsters in the *Beowulf* manuscript instructed their audience.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> While Oswald looks at monsters a whole and how they illustrate societal concerns about gender, her work does not attempt to propose gender fears as the basis for any one work or collection, which is the purpose here.

While it is impossible to know exactly who made up the audience of *Beowulf*, scholars can be relatively certain about some traits. The audience was likely, as Hugh Magennis says, a “group rather than individuals in private” (9). Books were far too rare to be read in isolation. Texts were communal documents, and reading was a communal act. The audience was also one familiar with the ethics and mores of Christianity as well as with the ethos of blood-feuds and the importance of revenge (Whitelock 71).<sup>3</sup> The manuscript presented very real lessons to its audience: survival in the face of powerful enemies, the importance of leaders in preserving the community, and the important role warriors served in protecting it. The focus, then, is on community and the ways in which people fit into it. The emphasis on correct performance of gender was to ensure that people behaved in ways helpful to the community as a whole. Individualism, says Magennis, “[could] bring the community to danger” (38). Individuals conformed to behavioral standards not just for the community’s comfort, but to help guarantee its very survival. This exigency forms the basis for dire warnings the *Beowulf* texts present about the consequences of failed performances. While the version of the warrior society presented in the texts certainly did not represent the reality, it did represent the idealized goal of the culture. The texts use idealized version of gender performance to teach the audience what *could be* in the hopes of giving the warrior audience stringent guidelines to which they could aspire.

The reality of gender binaries in Anglo-Saxon society was something much more fluid than those presented in the poem. Exact dates do not exist, but scholars typically date the compilation of the *Beowulf* manuscript to the early eleventh century. This was a time of rapid change in Anglo-Saxon England, particularly in the realm of gender roles. Older historical scholarship has focused on the heavily patriarchal nature of Anglo Saxon society, and this is accurate to an extent: men held the positions of power and women—particularly lower-class

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<sup>3</sup> For more on the intended audience of the poem, see Dorothy Whitelock’s *The Audience of Beowulf*.

women—were subject to men’s authority. However, historical research in the past thirty years has started to move away from this flat, overly simplistic view of gender roles and examine the ways in which the roles were actually in a state of dramatic flux, particularly in the latter half of the Anglo-Saxon period (Rabin 261). The law itself may have been slow to change, but it changed nonetheless. While the law placed women under the *mund*, or guardianship, of male relatives, gains in the position and rights of widows demonstrate a growing move toward acceptance of female agency (Ross 9). Property rights relaxed in favor of widows and women were allowed more choice—albeit limited and closely watched choices. Many of these changes applied only to upper-class women, particularly those to whom the community entrusted the perpetuation of their ruling and warrior classes (4). These changes, however slight they may seem now, likely felt radical to a society used to the close monitoring and subjugation of all women. Even the smallest slackening of regulation could provoke a backlash, particularly at a time when Anglo Saxon society was already threatened by outsiders, as Kathryn Powell argues in her work “Meditating on Men and Monsters” (4). Relaxation of gender roles directly affronted a traditional and deeply ingrained gender division; with society facing increased attacks from outside invaders, changes to traditional structures may very well have felt like an attack from within the community itself.

Yet, such changes in no way meant that Anglo Saxon society was egalitarian in its treatment of women. The community system was still predicated on a basic separation in the gender system, a system that ensured male dominance. While aristocratic women enjoyed more freedoms within this community than women living in some other European cultures at the time, these freedoms were in no way absolute and always open to challenge. Women were still largely “viewed as socially inferior” (Rivers 209) and their reality was “one of subservience to male



leadership” (Magennis 107). While women gained limited property rights toward the end of the tenth century, there always existed an awareness that these rights could be taken away by the men of the community, simply because that is where the power was.<sup>4</sup> In Anglo-Saxon society, says Bullough, “Male domination was the will of nature and [. . .] to try to challenge nature in the name of an imagined principal of equality was quite contrary to the interests of both the individual and community” (31). Clearly defined roles ensured that society could perpetuate itself. This was particularly important to the warriors themselves, who lived according to strict codes of conduct. Bullough succinctly explains that “manhood differs, but ultimately the most simplistic way of defining it is as a triad: impregnating women, protecting dependents, and serving as a provider” (34). Women, by contrast, were impregnated, were protected, and were provided for. The primary purpose establishing and attempting to maintain these strict gender roles was simple: “[T]he regulation of reproduction” (Ross 4). In this way, the warrior society was able to perpetuate itself and maintain internal stability. To move outside these narrowly defined gender roles was to ensure the “entire gender system was [spun] into a crisis” (McNamara 7). Thus the texts in the *Beowulf* manuscript—*The Passion of Saint Christopher*, *The Wonders of the East*, *The Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle*, *Beowulf* and *Judith*—appear to be a sort of response to this perceived crisis. They are heroic tales of warriors in warrior societies who battle monsters to protect their community through careful performance of their assigned genders. The monstrosity in these texts is not defined solely by monstrous bodies—some texts lack a physical monster altogether—but by the inappropriate actions the characters perform. True, they are threats to the community because they attack it in very real, physical ways; but their greater threat lies in the ways in which they refuse to conform to

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the changing roles of women at the close of the tenth century, see *Women in Anglo-Saxon England* by Christine Fell, Elizabeth Williams, and Cecily Clark. Also useful in understand the shifting nature of women’s roles is Margaret Clunies Ross’s “Concubinage in Anglo-Saxon England” and the work by Rivers and Rabin cited here.

community expectations concerning their gendered behavior. At the root of these expectations lies the most potent anxiety of all: if men no longer perform as men, and women no longer perform as women, perpetuation of the community fails.

### III. CULTURAL CONCERNS

#### **Paternity Concerns**

The first texts in the manuscript voice one of the essential concerns of Anglo-Saxon society: the masculine responsibility to impregnate women and thereby continue the community. Some of these texts, such as *Beowulf*, address these issues in very overt ways while others, such as *The Passion of St. Christopher* and *The Wonders of the East*, instead subtly hint at them. Warrior culture was strongly patrilineal, and paternal ancestry defined a person's place in the community (Lees 141). The purity of the race was preserved through careful, deliberate sex acts; men were to pick the partner who would produce the best possible lineage. One of the central concerns with monsters reflects this basic masculine function—monsters must be produced by something. This provides distinctly sexual overtones to the topic of monstrosity; for a monster to be produced implied that somewhere in its history, there existed a serious sexual perversion. The community had a deeply ingrained belief that “monsters had a human genealogy originating from a historical event of sexual deviance” (Monk 89).<sup>5</sup> In other words, monsters only existed because at some point in the past someone committed a sexual transgression. Many monsters were traditionally seen as descendants of the biblical Cain. These monsters bore a particular mark of masculine transgression: when men failed to impregnate women, women were impregnated in other ways by other creatures. These women gave birth to monsters and thus monstrous races were born and stalked the earth with disastrous consequences. In *Beowulf*, the

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<sup>5</sup> For more on the medieval perspective on and evolution of this belief, see Christopher Monk's “A Context for the Sexualization of Monsters in *The Wonders of The East*.”

murderous Grendel is placed “among the race of Cain,” a product of tainted bloodlines; his rampages at Heorot render it empty for twelve years, destroyed the center of Hrothgar’s warrior culture (Fulk 93).<sup>6</sup> In *The Wonders of the East* and *The Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle* the monstrous live in isolated communities far from humans. The punishment for masculine failure to impregnate and feminine failure to produce human offspring is terrifying; not only is the community threatened, but it may be entirely supplanted by the monstrous.

While *The Passion of St. Christopher* merely hints at the monstrosity of its titular character, its inclusion in the manuscript does speak to a certain preoccupation with monstrous paternity. The first three hundred lines of the text are missing, and many scholars suspect St. Christopher’s monstrosity is detailed more carefully in these lines (Powell 2). In early Christian iconography, St. Christopher is frequently portrayed with the body of man and the head of a dog. The descriptions surviving in the manuscript indicate that this is the same monstrous St. Christopher chronicled in the *Beowulf* manuscript. As King Dagnus prepares to torture Christopher, he orders his followers to fetch “an iron bench [. . .] equal in height to the man’s stature—it was twelve fathoms tall” (Fulk 3). Such a comparison places Christopher at roughly seventy-two feet tall, a sentiment echoed later when readers are told that a piece of timber “of immense size” that is “as tall as the man’s stature” (7). These inhuman proportions hint at St. Christopher’s monstrous origins. He is surely “a member of a race of dog-headed giants” (Powell 2). Like other texts in the manuscript, *The Passion of St. Christopher* indicates that monstrosity—particularly as a ramification for sexual deviance on the part of Anglo Saxon men—was very much a central concern to the compiler of the text. Of course, St. Christopher does pose some issues to this conception of monsters as a sort of negative consequence for gender misbehavior. While he may be the product of a historical sexual impurity, he seems to be

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<sup>6</sup> All lines referenced are from R.D. Fulk’s translation of the *Beowulf Manuscript*.

immune from the damnation this typically implies. Christopher is not a threatening figure; despite his monstrous body, he is protected by God and offers salvation to those who witness his miracles—“forty-eight thousand one hundred fifteen” people, the text assures readers (Fulk 9). Perhaps such devout Christianity can overcome the sexual impurity that created Christopher. His inclusion in the manuscript, however, likely owes at least a partial debt to Anglo-Saxon society’s fascination with monstrosity and sexual purity (Orchard 20). That such a creature can exist plays on society’s fears—fears that are given a much louder voice in the following sections of the text.

*The Wonders of the East* serves as an additional repository of those fears concerning paternity hinted at in *The Passion of St. Christopher*. *The Wonders of the East* reads as a catalogue that provides “sparse details of some thirty two monsters” (Orchard 18). If, as Dana Oswald asserts, monsters often serve as outlets for concerns surrounding sexuality, *The Wonders of the East* then brings Anglo-Saxon fears about sexuality to the forefront. Though the descriptions in the text are, as Orchard notes, sparse, the illustrations that accompany the text highlight the sexual nature of monstrosity. The images depict “thirteen scenes involving naked or semi-naked monsters” (Monk 84). This is despite the fact that “none of the monsters is explicitly described in the text that these images illustrate as naked” (86). What is important, then, is that the artists *chose* to depict them in this way—their bodies and sexualities are put on display. Their choices indicate a sort of fascination with the physical aspects of monstrosity, particularly in connection with the monsters’ sex characteristics. When considered in conjunction with sexually suggestive subtext in the text itself, these displays seem to indicate a sort of instinctive connection of monstrosity and sex—and by extension, monstrosity and gender, closely

connected with physical sex characteristics in Anglo-Saxon culture.<sup>7</sup> In *Locotheo*, for example, live a people “who are fifteen feet tall, and they have a white body and two faces on a single head” (21). Most disturbing, however, is their reproductive practices: “[T]hey go on ships to India and there they bring their offspring into the world” (21). The threat is that these monsters have the ability to *spread*; they move and bring their offspring into the world in far off lands, polluting places that were remote and therefore seemingly safe. The threat implicit to Anglo-Saxon society is clear; their masculine failures are not the only danger. Monsters and their progeny exist and are, apparently, able to travel in order to consume and supplant their society. The repeated references to reproduction and propagation reveal an essential fear surrounding the creation of these races. If the creation of a monstrous race was due to “a point of transgressive sexual behavior,” then *The Wonders of the East* simply serves as a reminder of how often these transgressions take place (Monk 79). Since ensuring the purity of the reproductive line is a male’s job, the fear just under the surface is that somewhere, at some time, a man failed in his duties.

These concerns surrounding paternity crystalize most clearly in *Beowulf*. The first monster to enter into the heroic world of *Beowulf* is Grendel, a troll-like creature whose lack of a clear paternal lineage illustrates, once again, the anxieties in the Anglo-Saxon community concerning its physical survival. This concern with paternity opens the poem, where readers are introduced to “Scyld, son of Scef” (Fulk 87). Readers are then treated to a discussion of Danish lineage, culminating in Hrothgar, the current king. By understanding Hrothgar’s heritage, it seems, readers can better understand Hrothgar. Such patrilineal introductions are standard practice throughout the poem. Beowulf, the heroic Geat is the son of “a noble leader named

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<sup>7</sup> Many of the sexual references throughout the *Beowulf* manuscript are hinted at, rather than being explicitly stated. For more on the treatment of sex and sexuality in Anglo-Saxon culture, see Hugh Magennis’s “No Sex Please, We’re Anglo Saxons: Attitudes to Sexuality in Old English Prose and Poetry.”

Ecgtheo” and is rarely introduced or discussed without reference to his powerful father (103). Attaching the father’s name is not simply symbolic—it allows readers and community members to understand Beowulf’s place in the society. Hrothgar, for example, is able to place Beowulf immediately and even recite his lineage, exclaiming, “His father was called Ecgtheo, to whom Hrethel of the Geats gave his only daughter” (111). Indeed, it is only after his lineage is made plain that Beowulf is allowed into the hall community. Beowulf as an individual warrior may be a threat; Beowulf as a community member—determined by his father’s line—is heroic.

Yet Grendel’s first entrance bears no patronymic marker; he is quite simply Grendel. Rather than contextualizing Grendel as a part of a community—even if that community is a monstrous one—the poet instead emphasizes his singularity; readers are informed he is “cursed among the race of Cain” and a part of the “deformed races” of the world (93). Certainly the race of Cain provides some context for Grendel’s existence, but it fails to answer the most obvious and pressing question: who—or what—produced *this particular monster*? While his maternal line is later introduced, the lack of paternity clearly marks him as other. The community has no context with which to understand him and therefore has no way to integrate him into their understanding of communal life. The *Beowulf* poet “emphasizes that the monster’s parentage is hidden: men have no knowledge of Grendel’s father” (Kroll 122). Grendel’s monstrosity, then, is a powerful indictment of the failure to keep ancestry pure. Grendel serves as a sort of anti-man: he is the result of masculinity gone wrong, of a man failing to produce and provide for his offspring. Sexual impurity produces catastrophic results. His murky lineage is responsible for his even murkier behavior transgressions—transgressions that terrorize the community and seem to signal (at least until Beowulf arrives) its impending doom.

Certainly the repeated references to paternity—whether overtly discussed, as with Grendel, or merely hinted at throughout texts like *The Passion of St. Christopher* or *Wonders of the East*—reveal a fundamental concern on the part of Anglo-Saxon society. The emphasis is on the fact that monstrosity can spread through the irresponsible actions of men. When men fail to impregnate women and perpetuate the pure Anglo-Saxon community, monsters can take their places. The blame falls largely on the masculine, who assume the more active role in reproduction.

However, passivity does not absolve the women who bear these monsters. When men fail in their masculine duty to perpetuate the community, women are to serve as the last defense against the creation of monstrosity. These texts, while chronicling the failures of men, also indict women when it comes to assigning blame for the existence of monstrosity. The language describing the female monsters is particularly revelatory of these sexual expectations. Most of *The Wonders of the East* presents the various monsters in straightforward prose, with few commentaries. Yet, near the Red Sea is a race of women who have “beards far down as their breast” (27). These women essentially blur gender lines; they are female but have the physical characteristics of men. They behave in masculine ways, as well, acting as “huntresses” who use “tigers and lions and lynxes” to track their prey (27). Other than their beards, nothing overtly monstrous appears, at least not physically. Their prowess as hunters—typically a masculine activity—however seems to give the author pause. All of these gender transgressions only “amplify the sexualization of this strange race of hybrid women” (Monk 86). When the author turns to other female monsters, his commentary on the moral status of such monstrosity becomes overt. The author includes Alexander’s victory over one particularly heinous group of women who are described as “obscene” and “disgraceful” due to their “filthiness” (29). The language

reveals not just a disgust with a monstrous body, but a sense of fear and shame that is not echoed elsewhere in the text. The reason for this is likely in the sexually charged language used to describe the women:

*Donne syndan opere wif þa habbað eofere tuxas ond feax oð helan side, ond oxan tægl on lendunum.*

There are other women who have the tusks of a boar and hair down to the heel, and an oxtail on their hindquarters. (Fulk 26-27).

The oxtails described in the Old English version have sexually charged connotations; the Old English terms used stem from the Latin, *lumbus*, which refers to loins or the seat of sexual desire (Monk 86). The language, then, implicates these monstrous women in a sexual transgression. They do not merely have tails; they have tails that indicate a past sexual deviance. If a man's job is to impregnate women to ensure the continuity of the community, women have the duty—and the responsibility—of producing that community. Monstrous races can only be produced by women who failed to safeguard their sexual purity and thereby produced this monstrous, cursed race. The very existence of these monsters is an affront to the ideals of femininity and masculinity. *The Wonders of the East* serves as a sort of warning: when women fail in their feminine duties, they fail to preserve the community as a whole. The monsters chronicled in *The Wonders of the East* remind the community what happens when men and women fail in their most essential roles.

Grendel's mother echoes these concerns about female purity in *Beowulf*. As the only known ancestor to Grendel, Grendel's mother assumes not just a maternal role, but a paternal one, as well. Grendel and his mother were spotted roaming the moors, yet the community “knew of no father, whether any mysterious creatures had been born before [Grendel]” (Fulk 175). She is the only known source of Grendel's monstrosity; in a patriarchal society that relies on lines of



paternity for community survival, her role as both mother and father is profoundly disturbing.<sup>8</sup> If one of the foundational definitions of masculinity concerns impregnating women and preserving a patrilineal line, then a basic assumption is that women exist to be impregnated. That Grendel's mother has no male counterpoint—that she exists as the sole source of Grendel—is not just a failure of femininity, but a direct affront to the very definition of Anglo-Saxon masculinity. The poet's "emphasis on the lack of a Grendel senior" is designed to disturb the Anglo-Saxon audience of the poem (Morgan 59). As Oswald succinctly puts it, "What must be most feared about Grendel's mother is that she might not need a father in order to bear children" (83). The implications are not so dangerous for the feminine, but they are disastrous for the masculine. Masculine identity was built on the assumption that men are necessary to physical survival and community perpetuation. Grendel's mother and her paternal role directly challenge that assumption. Anything that renders masculinity irrelevant threatens the community for the community is built on the premise of masculine survival and protection. In a society where gender divisions and binaries are needed to perpetuate the community, her inability to defer to masculinity in socially acceptable ways undermines the fabric of the community as a whole.

The same issues are repeated in the text of *Judith* elsewhere in the manuscript. Judith provides a counterpoint to these fears; she illustrates the responsibility of women to maintain the community's ancestry.<sup>9</sup> Throughout much of the manuscript, men—in the forms of Alexander the Great and Beowulf—serve to illustrate the correct performances of masculinity. Judith fulfills this role as moral exemplum for femininity. Holofernes, the craven Assyrian invader,

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<sup>8</sup> Grendel's ancestry is ascribed to Cain elsewhere in the text, yet that does not explain the presence of Grendel in the Danes' land at this precise time. While Cain provides ancestry in the form of a historical lineage, he does not provide paternity, a more immediate concern when it comes to Grendel's mother.

<sup>9</sup> Scholars have long debated *Judith's* inclusion in the manuscript, particularly in light of Sisam's assertion that monsters are the primary motivation for the arrangement. However, Holofernes' behavior is appropriately "monstrous" to consider *Judith* to be, essentially, a story of monsters and the warriors who defeat them.

calls for Judith to “be fetched with all haste, laden with rings, draped in bangles, to his bedchamber” (Fulk 301). He plans to “sully the radiant lady with filth and defilement” (303). The language describing Holofernes echoes that used to describe Grendel in an earlier text, suggesting that, despite his humanity, he is the central monster of the text. He is, like Grendel, the “baleful devil’s spawn” and one who is “loathed” by the community he threatens (303). Once again readers see a masculine failure: Holofernes’s intended defiling of Judith threatens her community.<sup>10</sup> With no man to defend her, the task then falls to Judith to protect herself. Instead of submitting to his monstrous will, she focuses on how “very easily [she could] deprive the monster of life before the shameless criminal awoke” (305). Unlike the women in *The Wonders of the East* or Grendel’s mother, Judith takes action to prevent the creation of a monstrous race—something that certainly could have been the result of her union with Holofernes. If the men cannot preserve the community, then it is her responsibility to compensate for this masculine failure. Rather than submit, she “carve[s] halfway through his neck [. . .] so that his head rolled away onto the floor” (307). Judith preserves herself, and in doing so, preserves the paternal purity of her community.<sup>11</sup> Judith acts as a direct comparison to those women who, under Anglo-Saxon morality, allowed such sexual perversion to perpetuate itself into monstrosity. In this way, Judith exemplifies the idealized feminine gender performance; she preserves her purity and in doing so, preserves the purity of her people.

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<sup>10</sup> Unlike other forms of *Judith*, the poem in the *Beowulf* manuscript removes all overt reference to Judith’s possible seduction of Holofernes (Magennis, “No Sex Please, We’re Anglo Saxons” 9). This elision makes sense, however, if the story of *Judith* is included in this particular manuscript to promote positive ideals of feminine behavior.

<sup>11</sup> Judith’s use of violence, and the sexual implications of her actions, will be discussed in more detail in a later section. It is important to note, however, that Judith’s actions would be received differently by the changing audience of Anglo-Saxons. While those in favor of more traditional gender roles would exult at the preservation of her purity, certainly others would have been encouraged to see a woman exercise her agency over a man. This dual reception does not, however, change the essential message: women must preserve the purity of the community when male fail to do so.

## Protection and Leadership

While the thread of patrilineal concerns runs throughout the texts of the manuscript, it is by no means the only gender performance being critiqued or taught to the audience. Bullough says masculinity specifically consists of three roles: impregnating women, protecting descendants, and providing for the community. These last two are the other concerns that run through the texts of the manuscript. Central to those concerns are the masculine duty to protect the community, both through the defeat of outside threats and the proper leadership of society. These central concerns dominate the text of *The Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle* and *Beowulf*. After all, while early texts establish the threat of masculine failures, these texts attempt to provide positive ideals for which the male audience can strive to attain. Alexander and Beowulf, and their juxtaposition with the monsters they battle, illustrate the ideals of the Anglo-Saxon warrior, though even they occasionally fail to live up to these lofty goals.

Both warriors are frequently contrasted with the monsters they fight, and this is most clearly done in the text of *Beowulf*. Grendel's lack of paternity, discussed earlier, means he exists outside the community, and this status as an outsider means he is also fails to meet his other masculine expectations. Bullough defines protecting the community and its dependents as an essential characteristic of manhood. Grendel, however, destroys rather than protects. The purpose of warrior culture was to provide a system to preserve society; men were armed and fought in the defense of their people. Grendel is an outsider to this community and so instead is "the enemy of humankind" and a "repulsive loner" (Fulk 97). His murky paternity and masculine failures repulse the community; yet, he represents the community's worst fears, and so the community is utterly unable to repel him. Instead, he enters Heorot, the mead hall and heart of warrior culture, and makes "war on justice" (95). Again, his otherness is a perversion of his

masculinity—rather than defending the community, Grendel wantonly destroys and kills. The warrior is certainly expected to be violent, but violence should serve the interests of the community.<sup>12</sup> As Lees points out, “violence may be implicit in the structure of warrior society” but “Grendel’s desire [for aggression] is channeled into the production of death” of the community (142-143). The problem with Grendel is that he directs his male aggression to an inappropriate place. The masculine in society defend and protect and use this violence in a communal way; they create a society of warriors. Beowulf sets out for the land of the Danes only after he “select[s] fighters from among the men of the Geats, the boldest he could find” (Fulk 99). When he arrives, he emphasizes the communal nature of these warriors: “We are men of the nation of the Geats [. . .] We have come looking for your lord” (104). The emphasis is on *we*, a community come to save the Danes.<sup>13</sup> Yet Grendel is “the loner” who enters the hall as an individual and destroys the symbolic heart of the community (115). In this way, Grendel serves as a double warning to the male audience of *Beowulf*—not only is this monstrosity what happens to men who dare to exist outside the boundaries of their society, but those men who act totally independently bring harm and destruction to society.

Throughout the Grendel episode, Beowulf serves as a counterpoint to Grendel’s monstrosity; he embodies an idealized masculinity and therefore serves as a sort of exemplar for the audience. Beowulf, the “offspring of Ecgtheo,” has the correct patrilineal heritage and arrives in Heorot in the company of warriors ready to defend it (127). When preparing to fight Grendel, Beowulf once again displays the idealized characteristics of masculinity the poem seeks to impart on its audience. Beowulf boasts to Hrothgar, “I shall achieve a manly feat or meet my

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<sup>12</sup> This is a common expectation that will be echoed later in *Judith*, as well.

<sup>13</sup> While Beowulf ultimately faces Grendel independently, his inclusion of other warriors in his journey indicates his understanding of the communal nature of masculinity, if only in a symbolic form. Though a warrior may win individual glory, he does so with the sanctioning of his society.

final days in this mead-hall” (129). Despite the fact Beowulf plans to fight alone, he binds his actions to their community through this promise; his “manly feat” seals his connection as a protector of the Danes. His oath illustrates the masculine ideal: a warrior who will fight to defend the hall or die trying. In his oath, the Beowulf poet “gives primary value to men’s responsibility to and dependence on other men” (Kroll 119). The community depends on these masculine warriors for survival. Grendel exists as an “alien demon” and therefore owes no allegiance to anyone (139). Beowulf’s promise is more explicitly contrasted with Grendel’s unmasculine behavior during the fight. Grendel steals into the hall “under the clouds” of night, in contrast to Beowulf who arrives by daylight and proclaims his intentions (133). While Grendel “exhibits disregard if not outright disdain for the symbols and ceremonies of human order,” Beowulf arrives with the sole intention of defending those very same symbols with his life (Parks 6). Beowulf and Grendel experience surges of masculine rage and the aggression, “both infuriated” (Fulk 137). Yet, when confronted with the challenge of the fight, Beowulf resolutely stays “wise and indomitable” to “cleanse Hrothgar’s hall” (141). Grendel, on the other hand, is immediately “anxious in his intent to escape” after being confronted by Beowulf (135). Once again, Beowulf represents the idealized communal warrior—the defender of the community who fulfills his oath to protect the hall—while Grendel functions as a terrified individual who is unable to face the consequences of his actions. In his feminine fear, he rips off his own arm and ensures his own death. His actions are certainly not the “manly feat” Beowulf vows. Beowulf’s triumph, then, is the triumph of properly executed masculinity.

After fifty years of peace, Beowulf, now King of the Geats, must confront his final nemesis—the dragon. Throughout the poem, the poet emphasizes the role of the king; leaders share their wealth for the good of the community. Hrothgar is the “disburser of rings” and is a

just king precisely because “he did not neglect his promise: he distributed rings, a fortune at feast” (Fulk 89, 91). While masculine warriors defended the realm and ensured societal survival through aggression, the king ensured the same survival through his generosity and benevolence. In a society where men are dependent on one another for protection, this generosity is a way to cement relationships and preserve loyalty. It is not merely symbolic; it serves a pragmatic societal function essential for survival. The dragon, however, has gold and treasure, but he chooses to hoard and guard it jealously. On this masculine failing, the *Beowulf* poet leaves little to interpretation. The dragon, the audience is told, is a creature who goes “looking for a temple in the earth where, old in winters, it keeps watch over heathen gold; it is none the better for that” (237). Whereas Beowulf, Hygelac, and Hrothgar share their gold in the hall, the center and focus of heroic warrior society, the dragon segregates himself with his treasure and keeps it for himself (Magennis 38). Where other leaders, like Beowulf, devote and sacrifice their lives for the community’s survival, the “dragon devotes, and ultimately sacrifices, its life to guard the heathen gold” (Kroll 128). He represents a new masculine failure, this one more concerned with the preservation of the society as a whole in pragmatic terms. The preservation of society is a masculine responsibility. Whether it is ensured through procreation, aggression against enemies, or benevolent sharing, it is the responsibility of men. The dragon’s failure is less overtly sexual, to be sure, but it is no less perverse for that.

This hoarding means that, like Grendel, the dragon is apart from warrior society. Having ensured no loyalty through the disbursement of riches, the dragon exists isolated and alone. Like Grendel, he seeks not to preserve communal society, but to destroy it from without. Angered by the theft of a single cup from his vast treasures, the dragon “goes looking for strongholds as it burns, a bare, violent, dragon, flies by night engulfed in flame” (Fulk 235). He is a destroyer

rather than preserver. In proper masculine fashion, the dragon “savored conflict, the craft of warfare,” but he improperly directs his aggression against the community by acting as an individual (237). He “began to spew flames, to burn up the bright manors,” eventually destroying Beowulf’s “own home, the best of halls” (239). Again, the aggression of the dragon *is* appropriately masculine. It is merely the individual nature of the aggression—the lack of a community focus—that makes it inappropriate. In a communal society, the warrior does *not* fight alone, and he does not fight solely for his own benefit. Masculinity is a communal performance. It relies on the sanctioning of the community for its correct performance; to act outside that community is yet another transgression of gender.

This time, though, the *Beowulf* poet refuses to give his audience the idealized gender performance through the character of Beowulf. The audience, after the last two monsters’ defeats, expects the archetypal masculine hero to slay the dragon and correct the failed gender performance. But here Beowulf, like the dragon, fails. Magennis points out that “Beowulf is engaged in a communal enterprise in fighting the dragon, as in fighting Grendel and Grendel’s mother” because he fights the dragon to prevent it from further destroying the community, yet “he goes to fight the dragon alone” (38). This action may not seem obviously problematic; after all, Beowulf alone kills Grendel and in the mere, Beowulf alone dares to enter the hall of Grendel’s mother. Yet Grendel and his mother were defeated by Beowulf *the warrior*—a young man acting for the benefit of society. His actions were sanctioned by virtue of his pledge to Hrothgar and the Danes. As warrior, Beowulf is allowed to seek individual glory as long as it serves the best interests of society. Yet the dragon is facing Beowulf *the king*. Though he once again vows to perform a “manly deed,” such violence is the role of the warrior (253). As king of the Geats, Beowulf’s responsibilities have changed. Hygelac and Hrothgar demonstrate that

kings protect through benevolent sharing and that their warriors act as proxies for their violent actions. While Beowulf is taking the same masculine actions he took as a young man, he fails to recognize that his masculine responsibilities are now different. He is not a young warrior; he is an old king. In this way, Beowulf's decision to act as warrior rather than as king is a failure of expected masculine role. Like the dragon, Beowulf is unable to appropriately handle the masculine responsibility of leadership, and like Grendel's mother, he acts on a masculine desire for revenge that no longer belongs to him.

Beowulf's failure would be less horrific were it not for the fact he committed the ultimate failure: he has no offspring.<sup>14</sup> The most central concern for a warrior was his "ability to perform and beget children" (Bullough 41). Yet on the verge of death, Beowulf laments to Wiglaf that "[e]vents have swept away all my kin to their appointed end, men of valor" (Fulk 271). Beowulf is the last of his line. Men protect and perpetuate society, but most importantly, *men impregnate women*. Without procreation, the perpetuation and protection of society are rendered irrelevant. The community cannot exist if men fail at this essential task. Without Beowulf, the Geats have no clear leader. The poet, rather than reassuring the audience, instead issues a dire warning in the form of prophecies. A Geatish woman sadly sings her prophecies for the future of the Geats, repeatedly telling them "that she dreaded hard invasions of armies, a profusion of mayhem, terror of troops, abasement and captivity" (295). Beowulf's masculine failure does not merely punish him, but instead destroys the entire community of which he is a part. Perhaps, more than the monsters, this is the truly terrifying gender failure in the poem. Even the hero ultimately fails. Rather than providing a reassuring ending of the righting of the gender world, the poet leaves the

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<sup>14</sup> The motif of lineage ending at this treasure hoard is echoed elsewhere in the poem. The dragon dies here, and though the poem is silent on whether or not he has offspring, the poet certainly emphasizes his solitariness. The original keeper of the hoard is called "the last of an ancient race" (Fulk 235). Perhaps the poet is suggesting that hoarding is the ultimate temptation, one that leads to other failures that can destroy society completely.



readers with the image of “heaven swallow[ing] the smoke” (295). By denying the audience this satisfactory ending, the poet emphasizes the importance of the ultimate gender performance: sexually perpetuating the community itself.<sup>15</sup>

Where Beowulf fails, however, Alexander the Great is able to succeed, at least temporarily. In *The Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle* (now referred to simply as *Letter*), Alexander functions as a moral, masculine exemplum for his audience. Like Beowulf, Alexander functions as an important, if unrealistic, masculine ideal. From history the audience knows that Alexander fathered at least one child, his successor Alexander IV of Macedon. With this essential element of masculinity fulfilled, the text of *Letter* focuses on Alexander as protector and leader of the community. While Alexander battles monsters, as does Beowulf, he does not fail in his masculine leadership role. The text of *Letter* is more concerned with the “management of power” from a leadership perspective, but it relies on monstrosity as a vehicle for that modeling (Khalaf 665). When Alexander and his men are attacked by a “multitude of water-monsters, larger and fiercer in appearance than the elephants,” Alexander is able to order “that one hundred fifty of them be tossed into the river” (Fulk 49-51). Alexander battles monsters, but he does so as a king ought to—by ordering and leading his men. Throughout the text, the language maintains this emphasis. Alexander “direct[s] [his] trumpets,” and “[t]ells the troops to pitch camp” (51-53). Alexander is the ruler, and he, unlike Beowulf, understands what that entails for a man. He directs an army, providing leadership and preserving the community through his commands, a leadership that is “fundamental in order to keep their relationship stable” (Khalaf 662). When fighting the “teeth-despot,” Alexander busies himself with “positioning the force of the Greek army” (Fulk 57). While he does, at times fight *with* his men,

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<sup>15</sup> It is important to note that ultimately no man in *Beowulf* is able to correctly perform all three essential components of masculinity. In a time of shifting gender roles in Anglo-Saxon society, this seems to be the poet’s acknowledgement to the impossibility of the ideal being presented in the text.

he more often *commands* them as a leader should. He understands a central tenet of leadership in the Anglo-Saxon world, namely that “the power of the king directly derives from his army’s worth and faithfulness, and that leader’s attitude and behavior toward his troops” (Khalaf 662). In other words, his power will not come from rushing in to fight these monsters alone—as Beowulf does—because that is the power of a warrior. Alexander, as a leader, must still preserve his community, but he does so through his leadership and by ensuring the loyalty of his troops.

### **Femininity and the Role of Women**

Throughout the texts, then, readers see a constant modeling of idealized masculine behavior. Warriors and monsters alike demonstrate the multiple ways in which the proper performance of masculinity benefits the community, and, equally importantly, the ways in which improper performance can bring disaster. Men’s roles are clearly delineated and defined—and continuously modeled—throughout the texts. Yet, it is impossible to deny the fact that women, too, certainly have a role to play in their society. Their failures and successes are equally important to Anglo-Saxon culture, and they are most thoroughly addressed through the characters of Grendel’s mother and Judith, the primary female figures in the manuscript. These two women invite obvious comparisons—especially since they are the only “named” women in the text—if “Grendel’s mother” can be interpreted as a name, of course. The actions of these two women demonstrate the importance of women performing their socially sanctioned gender for the betterment of their society. When they fail to do so, as Grendel’s mother does, chaos ensues.

In *Beowulf*, while Grendel’s gender failures were often ones of lack—he lacked paternity, community, and courage—his mother’s failures are ones of excess. Grendel’s mother disturbs the community because she attempts to perform a masculinity that does not belong in her feminine performance. Women in warrior society were expected to be “a peace-bond between

clans or nations” (Morgan 59). The story of Hildeburh, which immediately precedes Grendel’s mother’s entrance into the story, serves as an illustration of this. After the loss of her “guiltless loved ones, sons and brothers” Hildeburh “lamented” and “mourned with dirges” (Fulk 157, 159). Her loss is experienced passively, as is appropriate for feminine grief. Retributive aggression, argues Acker, is the exclusive purview of men (705). Yet Grendel’s mother rejects lamentations and dirges; instead “still ravenous and gallows-minded, [she] intend[s] to mount a grievous undertaking, to avenge her son’s death” (Fulk 171). Certainly warrior society valued revenge. After the death of Hrothgar’s warrior, Beowulf tells the king, “Do not grieve, wise warrior. It is better for each that he avenge his friend than that he lament much” (Fulk 177). As a male warrior, revenge is the correct option, not laments or grief<sup>16</sup>. But for Grendel’s mother, a “lady” and “female troublemaker,” such actions are inappropriate (169).

The physical confrontation between Beowulf and Grendel’s mother serves only to further highlight the ways in which Grendel’s mother overreaches in her masculine gender performance and fails utterly in her feminine one. As Chance points out, the language the poet uses to describe Grendel’s mother’s attacks on Heorot is highly sexual, but it is the language of male sexuality, not female.<sup>17</sup> Grendel’s mother “penetrated” Heorot, and she “obliterated in his bed” Hrothgar’s trusted warrior Aeschere (Fulk 171). All sexual masculine action is ascribed to Grendel’s mother, thus highlighting her gender misperformance. The language is further sexualized when Beowulf confronts her in her underwater lair. She forcibly carries Beowulf to her hall and then “overturned the weary-hearted strongest of fighters” in order to stab him (187).

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<sup>16</sup> The Anglo-Saxon audience, according to Whitelock, would have been fairly comfortable with the idea of retributive justice and blood-feuds. The male audience would have likely viewed the actions of Grendel’s mother as a challenge to their position. Women may have felt the challenge, as well; there is also the possibility that the female audience reveled in the subversive agency of Grendel’s mother.

<sup>17</sup> Jane Chance, in her “The Structural Unity of *Beowulf*: The Problem of Grendel’s Mother,” has already clarified many of the issues surrounding the sexualization of Grendel’s mother’s fight with Beowulf, but they bear reviewing. See also Glenn Davis’s “The Exeter Book of Riddles and the Place of Sexual Idiom in Old English Literature.”

She holds him down and draws “her long knife” but is “denied entry” (189). Readers are, essentially, witnessing an attempted sexual act between Grendel’s mother—with her phallic knife—and the prone and helpless Beowulf. It is the ultimate perversion of gender for the male audience of the poem.<sup>18</sup> So not only does she procreate seemingly without men, she takes on a sexualized masculine role in attempting to penetrate Beowulf, threatening to undermine this warrior gender system completely.

Yet, like Grendel, Grendel’s mother is ultimately punished for her gender failures. Beowulf is saved by his gear; her penetration effort is “denied entry” and in this act Beowulf is able to reassert himself as the masculine role in the scene (Fulk 189). The giant’s sword in her lair—a monstrosly large phallic symbol appropriate for the idealized repository of all masculine behavior—is the perfect weapon for Beowulf’s reclamation of masculinity. The scene is, once again, told using the language of masculine sexual energy:

He seized the linked hilt then, champion of the Scyldings, fierce and unyielding at arms, drew the ring-sword without hope of surviving, struck angrily, so that the hard weapon groped for her neck, broke the bone-rings; the sword went all the way through the doomed covering of flesh, so that she sank to the floor; the sword was sweaty, the man exulted in his work. (189)

Beowulf rights the gender wrongs by penetrating Grendel’s mother. His “hard weapon” is able to slice through “the doomed covering of flesh” and bring her to the floor. The sword itself seems to exude a sexual satisfaction, sweating after the act. Most tellingly, however, is the poet’s assertion that “*the man*” exulted in his work. Prior to his penetration of the lady monster, Beowulf was a soldier, a fighter, even “the champion of the Geats” (189). Now, he is simply—and vitally—the *man* in the situation. The sexualized language in Beowulf’s defeat of Grendel’s mother is used to “paint Beowulf as full of a very masculine vigor” (Oswald 94). While Grendel’s mother represents a direct challenge to the masculine world because she so

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<sup>18</sup> Again, this is a perversion a female audience may have found simultaneously terrifying and immensely attractive.

successfully and perversely intrudes upon it, such a challenge cannot go unpunished. The poet brings his audience to the brink of disaster—the woman is ready to penetrate the man—but then rights the roles at the last minute, thus ensuring the audience that, while women may overreach, the masculine ideal can prevail to punish such monstrosity.

The treatment of Judith, coming directly after *Beowulf*, complicates these feminine ideals. In many ways she transgresses the very boundaries the earlier texts establish, forcing readers to somehow reconcile her actions with her gender. While Grendel's mother acts with a masculinity that does not belong to her, Judith also assumes a masculine role—a warrior protecting her community—but is instead praised for her actions. In many ways, Judith's actions echo the actions of Grendel's mother; her fight with Holofernes, for example, is similarly sexually charged. The final confrontation is once again rife with sexualized language, and once again it is the language of masculine sexuality, not feminine:

[Judith] grasped then the heathen man firmly by his scalp, pulled him toward her with her hands, insultingly, and cleverly placed the baleful, horrid man in such a way that she could most easily have her way with the wretch. The bound-haired one then struck the rancorous, destructive adversary with a decorated sword, so that she carved halfway through his neck, so that he lay in a stupor, drunk and severely wounded. [. . .] The courageous lady then struck the heathen dog smartly for a second time, so that his head rolled away onto the floor. (Fulk 307)

The linguistic parallels between Judith and Grendel's mother are striking. Like Grendel's mother, Judith is the one on the offensive, putting her adversary in a submissive, sexualized stance. While Beowulf is rendered prone on the floor, Holofernes is “grasped [. . .] by his scalp” and pulled close to Judith. Even the phrase “have her way with the wretch” is laden with sexual implications. Like Grendel's mother, Judith uses a sword—a phallic weapon—against an unarmed man. However, unlike Grendel's mother, Judith successfully penetrates her victim, not once but twice. While Grendel's mother is punished by Beowulf for assuming a masculine

warrior status, Judith is hailed as a “clever young woman,” “a courageous lady” and even “a saint” (309-10). Clearly, something must account for the vast difference in reception between the two females. The answer lies not in Anglo-Saxon expectations of femininity, however, but of masculinity. Judith’s deviations help us better understand the nature of masculinity and femininity in Anglo-Saxon society and their functions.

Grendel’s mother fought unnecessarily; her fight was personal—the death of her son—and did not, therefore, benefit the community. Beowulf, as masculine ideal, was there to save the day. He performed his masculinity correctly (excepting his failure to procreate), and therefore Grendel’s mother had no need or place to assume a masculine role. In *Judith* however, masculinity fails. Holofernes perverts his expectations—he violates fundamental understandings concerning impregnation, preservation, and protection. Only when these violations occur can a female character like Judith be given permission to act in masculine ways. With no one else to protect her or her community, Judith receives *de facto* warrior status. This is only permissible because of the masculine failure of her nemesis; Holofernes “perverts the proper functions of a lord” (Godfrey 17). He is a leader, but unlike Alexander, he is unable to fulfill this role well. He and his Assyrians “represent the extreme of men unable to consolidate these parts of their [responsibilities] or to apply them appropriate to social settings” (16). This means someone must rectify the situation, and the task falls to Judith. Her behavior is no less monstrous than Grendel’s mother in terms of strict gender expectations; she too acts in a typically masculine fashion to battle a man.

Yet, though the sexualized language of the fight with Grendel’s mother is mirrored in Judith’s battle with Holofernes, Judith is more closely aligned with the masculine hero than the monstrous woman. Again, there are parallels between the two warriors. Judith, like Beowulf,

fights her monster in his own lair. She does not boldly seek his dwelling, as Beowulf does, but instead is “brought to his sleeping tent,” a small nod to the expected passivity of the feminine. Like Beowulf she decapitates her opponent, even grabbing the monster’s hair at one point. Ever “mindful of her duties” she “entrust[s] [the head] to the hand of her conscientious accomplice to bear home” (307). Though Judith continues to lead the community as a warrior, she does not hoist the head herself. Rather, she allows her male companion to display it.<sup>19</sup> Judith is a sort of gender hybrid—she represents a feminine *and* masculine ideal. She protects her community and preserves her virginity, though she does so through masculine, sexualized violence. Despite her warrior-hero status, we cannot deny that Judith is “carrying out a sexual transgression” in assuming her masculine role (Godfrey 23). If the goal of the manuscript is to reassert the necessity of gender division, we must make sense of this perceived fluidity in some way.

Two possible answers to the conundrum can be found in other texts of the manuscript. It is possible that, like St. Christopher, Judith is exempted from traditional gender regulations and punishment because of her close connection to God. Before she faces Holofernes, after all, she does pray, beseeching God to grant her “victory and true faith, so that with this sword [she] may be permitted to cut down this purveyor of murder” (Fulk 305). Notably, Judith asks that she be “permitted” to cut down Holofernes. Alexander certainly does not ask for permission, and while Beowulf asks Hrothgar to sanction his fight with Grendel, he does so only after sailing across the sea with his best warriors and war gear; Beowulf’s request enters the realm of mere formality. He has decided to fight Grendel before he even leaves his home; Judith, on the other hand, does not prepare for her fight until after her request. The poet goes on to assure us that “the highest judge inspired her straightway,” once again emphasizing that Judith does not act on her own

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<sup>19</sup> Beowulf’s companions—four of them—also lift Grendel’s head after his fight, but this occurs only after Beowulf brings Grendel’s head from the mere on his own. Judith, in contrast, never presents her trophy, thereby distancing herself from her violent, and therefore masculine, triumph.

(305). In this way, Judith's actions are not her own; she lacks the agency of Grendel's mother, who sought revenge and used violence on her own terms. Judith, instead, acts as an agent of God, making her violence above reproach. This reversal of the gender roles becomes something the Anglo-Saxon audience can hardly question; like St. Christopher, she is divinely inspired and therefore divinely sanctioned.

The other possible answer lies in the text of *Beowulf*, particularly in Beowulf's encounter with the dragon. Both Judith and Beowulf are leaders of their respective communities, as is Holofernes. While many of the texts, including *Judith* and *Beowulf*, demonstrate that the need to reproduce lies at the heart of Anglo-Saxon anxieties concerning gender, leadership is nonetheless a core tenet of masculine responsibilities. Beowulf fails, ultimately, because he does not lead as a king should; he took on a warrior role that was not his to assume and failed to ensure that his lineage would continue. For these crimes, Beowulf and the Geatish community are destroyed. Similarly, Holofernes fails as a leader of the Assyrians. He fails to provide "the guidance that would be expected of their leader" (Godfrey 16). And for this masculine failure, he suffers the ultimate humiliation—he is defeated by a woman. In this way the lessons of *Judith* encompass all of three traits of masculinity outlined by Bullough—Judith must protect the sexual perpetuation of her community by fending off her would-be rapist; Holofernes fails to protect his community through leadership and therefore Judith must step in to fill the void. Whatever the reason for the acceptability of Judith's transgression, one point remains central to all the texts in the manuscript—the community must be protected and preserved at all costs. While gender divisions are central to that preservation throughout the text, the *Judith* text demonstrates that they may be transgressed if necessary.



## V. CONCLUSION

Throughout the *Beowulf* manuscript, the writers emphasize the importance of correct gender performance—particularly of masculinity—to the survival of Anglo-Saxon warrior society. While the world of the *Beowulf* manuscript likely looked very little like the practical realities confronting Anglo-Saxon society, that was not really the point. The goal was to emphasize an ideal—a perfect binary that, while unattainable, may at least have served as a guide. If the gendered behavior in the poem was impossible to replicate in real life, at least warriors *attempting* to replicate it would move closer to a binary system. By setting the bar high, the manuscript moves its audience a little further in the right direction—a little closer to the “manly actors” they saw in the texts themselves. They would, at least, be more ready to confront the real challenges facing Anglo-Saxon warriors: foreign invaders and rival societies who threatened the community. And if a dragon or monstrous Abyssinian leader just happened to appear? Well, then they would be ready for that, too.

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**The New F Words:**

**The Importance of Failure and Frustration in AP English Classrooms**

by

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Three weeks into a new semester, I was sitting at my desk when one of my students came into my room visibly upset. She was part of my Advanced Placement Literature and Composition class and easily one of my most motivated and naturally gifted students. Naturally, then, I was stupefied when she approached my desk and said, near tears, “I think I really screwed up on the test today.” She explained her anxieties, but in the process of explaining, her angry tears broke free and she started to cry in earnest. She abashedly explained that her tears were, in part, due to the stress of applying to colleges, a course load of six Advanced Placement/college level classes, and a work schedule that left little time for her to get everything else completed. A short pep talk and a couple of hugs later, she left my room feeling at least more confident about her English class, but I was amazed by the pressure under which many of my students found themselves. Even more significantly, I was struck by how hard of a blow failure—the real “f” word to many of these teens—could strike for these students for whom the stakes were simply too high.

Any teacher will acknowledge that struggle is an important part of learning. No matter how naturally gifted the student may be, every student will inevitably face setbacks, and even outright failure. Unfortunately, many gifted students are unable to handle these types of challenges because their natural ability, work ethic, or sheer determination have made them a rarity.<sup>20</sup> When these students enter college-level situations, such as an Advanced Placement classroom, they often experience more discouragement and frustration than another student may

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<sup>20</sup> For the sake of this work, “gifted” will be used to mean those students who are academically “high-achieving.” While this complicates traditional educational use of the word, the reality is that traditionally “gifted” students are often in classes such as Advanced Placement courses with other students who, while not gifted in the pedagogical sense determined by testing, are equally high-achieving and motivated, and who often face the same challenges concerning failure. Since it is not always possible for a classroom teacher to differentiate between these types of students, they will be treated as a unified group here.

have. This is particularly true in a subject like English, where “right” answers are often slippery and nebulous. Students experiencing frustration want clear answers—a visible path back to the success they are used to experiencing—and because English cannot always provide such clear pathways, the students are especially liable to struggle. While sound educational pedagogy and psychology tell us that failure can be useful, such failure can make gifted students feel unsafe, something that is especially detrimental to their success. Add to this the new focus of the College Board to attract more at-risk and lower-achieving students to Advanced Placement classrooms, and the task confronting the teacher of an Advanced Placement English course can feel Herculean.

What these teachers need, then, is a way to provide a safe classroom environment for students of diverse backgrounds and educational experiences. This space needs to be one where failure is not only a frequent occurrence, but is seen as a means to improvement rather than as a looming catastrophe. Because of the pressures facing both students and teachers in an AP setting, however, many teachers are reluctant to actively promote frustration and failure. Staffing concerns, class size, and test scores frequently convince educators that their best course of action is to keep every student feeling confident and successful. The problem is that same confidence can be much more effectively bolstered by teaching students how to overcome failure. As AP English teachers, we simply must teach our students how to cope with failure. This means teachers must not only deal with frustration, but actively promote it within their classrooms.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> AP offers two English courses: AP Language & Composition and AP Literature and Composition. They are separate courses, typically, though not always, with AP Language being a junior year course offering and AP Literature being for seniors. For the purpose of this paper, they will be discussed in tandem.



## II. INHERENT CHALLENGES

### The Changing AP English Classroom

In order to fully understand the atmosphere of the AP English classroom, one has to understand the myriad of ways that classroom has changed since it was first conceived of in 1953. When AP English Literature and Composition was first piloted in 1953, it was a part of the efforts of elite college preparatory schools—Exeter, Andover and Lawrenceville—to better prepare their top students of spots in the Ivy League; the program initially was run in conjunction with faculty at Harvard, Yale and Princeton (Rothschild, 1999, p.175-177). To describe the first years of AP as elitist would be mild; admittance to the program was by invitation only. Some schools went so far as to require I.Q. tests for those wishing to be a part of the classes (Rothschild, 1999, p. 179). The first group of students to graduate from the AP program went on to attend some of the top colleges in the country, with nearly one-third of them graduating in the top 15% of those same elite colleges (Rothschild, 1999, 185). While these origins may seem a part of the distant past, they do have very serious ramifications for the current AP English classroom. The elitism inherent in the creation of these classes has been difficult to shake over the intervening decades; despite drastic changes in the College Board's policies—I.Q. tests, for example, are thankfully no longer used—the general impression remains: AP is for the most gifted, the most talented, and it is *hard*. This has led to new challenges as new students continue to populate these classrooms.

The elitism in the early program began to change as early as the 1960s. As Rothschild (1999) notes in his detailed history of the program, “[T]he democratic trends of the sixties called for better education for the many, rather than the best education for the few” (p. 185). This call echoed throughout the educational world, but it would not be until the 1980s and 1990s that its

effects would be truly felt in the AP English course. The College Board did away with any sort of entrance requirements for Advanced Placement classes in the early 70s, though many schools sidestepped this policy by creating prerequisite courses, which they then created entrance requirements for, effectively ensuring they could continue to “track” students throughout high school. In the 90s, College Board made their policy stricter; they formally forbade any use of prerequisites, entrance tests, or even GPA requirements to determine who could be in AP classes. Instead, the Board promoted “open entrance” policies, which urged schools to expand their AP courses and the number of students enrolled in them. This meant that AP “began to reach [a] number of students from urban and rural areas who would not have been considered or even known about AP in earlier years” (Rothschild, 1999, p. 190).

In the early 2000s, in an effort to help more students attend four year colleges and universities, programs like Advancement Via Individual Determination, or AVID, began working with students who would not normally consider college as an option—AVID targets potential first generation college students in particular—by concurrently enrolling them in AP classes and an AVID course designed to provide support and study skills. AP Literature and Composition is a favorite of the AVID program; all AVID students are required to be enrolled in at least one AP course, and AP English courses are frequently suggested as the best option. The expansion of such programs means that the faces in the AP English classroom have changed dramatically, which poses challenges; as Jeong (2009) pointed out, “Students come to the AP course with different levels of skills and preparation; for instance, minority and low-income populations tend to enter the class with fewer skills and less preparation” (p. 348). To be clear, this does not mean that these students cannot succeed in the course, or that they should not be

there; instead, it means AP teachers need to find new ways to reach this increasingly diverse population.

These challenges are, frankly, familiar to any teacher who has been in a staff development meeting in the past decade; differentiation is nothing new after all, but it does pose unique challenges in AP courses. Thanks to the legacy of No Child Left Behind and the advent of high stakes testing, the high school classroom is already filled with performance pressures for both teachers and their students. This is amplified, however, in the AP English classroom. The benefit of AP English is, of course, that students can earn college credit for these courses by taking the exam at the end of the year. In the exam, students have 60 minutes to complete approximately 55 multiple choice questions on unfamiliar texts and another 120 minutes to write three “impromptu” essays. The test focuses on “literary analysis and interpretation,” as well as on a student’s ability to write well—meaning the ability to argue for their unique interpretation of an unfamiliar text, support that interpretation with logical evidence from the text, and to do it all with a strong sense of voice and personality (Hansen, 2006, p. 465). This is a tall order for any student, but when such demands are added to the fact that these tests often determine college placements, the pressure becomes palpable. Colleges not only receive copies of students’ AP test scores, many of them also use mere enrollment in AP classes as a central factor in deciding a student’s acceptance to their universities (Rothschild, 1999, p. 198). The pressure, however, is not reserved only for students. In the era of accountability, many schools use students’ AP scores as a means “to evaluate AP teachers and schools” (Jeong, 2009, p. 348). So while the AP English classroom itself may have become increasingly egalitarian over the past six decades, the pressures and expectations have increased. This has led to some important—and complicated—realities.

The crux of the issue is simple: while teachers acknowledge the importance of failure as a learning experience, the realities of the AP English class leaves many unwilling to actively promote it within their classrooms. When the stakes are high and performance evaluations based on everything from raw test scores to student satisfaction with a course—a new part of the teacher evaluation process in Minnesota, for example—frustration and failure are dangerous to implement. The students in these AP classes are similarly resistant to these ideas; their future in college is inextricably bound to these courses; failure simply carries too much risk. One poor grade can send a student into a tailspin—the number of students I have had personally at my desk, panicky and near tears over a low grade, attests to this. A C is not merely a grade on a piece of paper; it can mean the end of scholarships and, as competition ramps up for spots at elite universities, that grade can be the difference between acceptance and denial. While many people trivialize these concerns on the part of students—“it’s just a *grade*” I hear my coworkers say, rolling their eyes, when they see me with a student upset over a paper or test—the concerns are real and must be acknowledged. Yes, they are just grades, but those grades mean something to students and their futures. The challenge for teachers is to find a way to promote failure and frustration while simultaneously ensuring that such “f” words do not overwhelm students or negatively impact their ability to succeed in the end—a tall order for any teacher, but a necessary one.

### **The Challenges of the Gifted Student**

In order to best understand how to promote failure with gifted students, teachers first have to understand the challenges inherent in teaching gifted students. Many people mistakenly assume that teaching advanced classes is somehow easier than teaching other courses. I do, admittedly, spend much less effort on classroom management in my Advanced Placement

seniors than I do with my regular English 10 students, but those seniors also come with a whole host of other issues that I do not have to deal with when working with my non-advanced classes. My colleagues often cannot quite believe the conversations they overhear me having with some students: “Is she really crying over an A-?” or “Seriously, that kid is arguing over a 97 on his paper because he wants it to be a 98?” While these concerns might sound ludicrous, they are representative of the issues that come with teaching gifted and high achieving students.

Understanding their unique psychology and mindsets can help teachers better understand their reactions to failure, as well. The idea of “giftedness” is nothing new in education. While gifted students were an important topic of the educational conversation in the 1990s, the passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 promptly silenced much of that discussion for many years. NCLB tied federal school funding to test scores, and specifically to minimum standards; schools had to prove they were meeting “Adequate Yearly Progress” (AYP) or risk losing important tax dollars. High-achieving students tend to pass these basic tests with ease and therefore do not put money in jeopardy. Lower-achieving students—who tended to be students of color, from low socioeconomic backgrounds, or who have learning and/or language disabilities—became the focus. Chval (2009) notes that, in educational research, “we see increased focus on students who are low performing and a commensurate failure to differentiate and focus on instruction for gifted and talented students” (p. 269). Certainly this focus on those students needing the most help is praiseworthy and important. But all students need our support, and this includes our gifted ones. For too long educators have assumed these kids will figure it out on their own, and as a result, many teachers forget or are blind to the unique challenges these students pose.

Students in Advanced Placement classes are often under inordinate amounts of pressure, some external, but much internal. These students are, as mentioned previously, taking AP

courses with the hopes of earning college credit. This means their daily performance often has very real-world ramifications. Many colleges continue to grant “credit and exemption from one or more required first-year writing courses to entering students with AP Test scores of 3, 4, or 5” (Hansen, 2006, p. 462). This means that for students in the course, their performance has very real financial consequences. Poor grades or frustration, then, can quickly make students anxious. This is compounded by the fact that, for many students, academic achievement is integral to their sense of self. After surveying gifted students on their self-concepts, Brown (1993) found that many gifted and high achieving students have “no identity for themselves other than achievement” (p. 186). Failure is not just a temporary setback; it is a statement on that student’s very sense of personal worth. This is complicated by the fact that gifted students have a tendency to compare themselves to others; achievement, after all, is often a comparative term—being “good” at something exists as a concept only in contrast to others being “bad” at it. Such comparisons are problematic in AP classrooms; in a regular classroom, the gifted student is exceptional. In an advanced classroom, with a high concentration of such students, extraordinary becomes the new ordinary. This can have detrimental effects on students because when placed with other gifted kids, self-esteem may suffer when they compare themselves and perceive their abilities as lacking (Hoge and Renzulli, 1993, p.455). Often these comparisons increase students’ stress levels, forcing them to feel as though they need to work even harder to maintain their status as extraordinary. This results in “high levels of stress, uncompleted projects, and an unwillingness to engage in [further] risk-taking behaviors” in the classroom (Cross, 1997, p. 184). This negative cycle can be difficult to break, especially for those students who may already be lacking the skills and background with which some of their classmates enter the course.

This pressure and stress is rooted in the psychological traits many gifted students share. Hoge and Renzulli (1993), in their survey of gifted students, found that giftedness seems to “incline the child toward a more critical attitude toward performance” and makes students susceptible to “unrealistic expectations” (p. 451, 461). This critical attitude appeared again as a defining trait of gifted psychology in Cross’s 1997 work, “Educating Gifted Children,” in which he echoes the earlier work by emphasizing gifted students’ “excessive self-criticism” and “perfectionist tendencies” (p. 181).<sup>22</sup> These expectations—which often include the belief that he or she will not struggle in school—coupled with the tendency to criticize any failure, can produce a cycle of negativity that is difficult to disrupt. Gifted students, Cross (1997) continued, “manifest supersensitivity [. . .], expanded awareness, [and] intensified emotions” (p. 182). It may seem ridiculous to many that a student would cry over a test, for example, but gifted students’ sense of worth is so inextricably bound up with their performance—and they are so critical of those performances—that tears seem almost unavoidable. Gifted students’ high expectations mean they often have a much more intense fear of failure, as well, making academic frustration particularly difficult for them (Brown, 1993, p. 184). Yet, the fact so many gifted students fear failure and are not adept at handling indicates a serious lack on the part of their education; they are not being forced to face failure and they are not being taught how to successfully overcome it. No student will be universally successful permanently; students must learn how to deal with these challenges early and in ways that can lessen the negative effects of such frustration. AP English teachers are uniquely situated to provide these opportunities due to

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<sup>22</sup> Perfectionism is used often in our society to describe anyone with exceedingly high standards, but the scientific definition differs in an important way. According to Cross (1997), perfectionism is “being dissatisfied with the difference between one’s ideal performance and one’s perception of his or her actual performance” (p. 184). The crucial difference is in the addition of “one’s perception of his or her actual performance.” In other words, a true perfectionist may, in fact, perform quite well and simply not be able to see that. In fact, he or she may actually be performing “perfectly” and simply *perceive* the performance as lacking in some way. This can be difficult for teachers to address, as a strong performance in the teacher’s view may still be a total failure to the student.

the nature of their audiences and coursework. Because interpretation and analysis of a literary work is an often frustratingly nebulous skill, students are bound to encounter frustration in English classrooms of any level.

However, AP English teachers have one last hurdle they must overcome if they wish to encourage frustration and strategies for overcoming it in their classrooms: gifted students' aversion to risk taking. Students will likely never fail or be frustrated if they never try something outside of their comfort zone, and this is precisely why so many gifted students avoid any type of academic risk-taking. Because of their perfectionist tendencies, gifted students are typically "not willing to explore any avenues where success is not guaranteed" (Brown, 1993, p. 186). This can mean students avoid assignments or situations that seem particularly unfamiliar, or even avoid some classes altogether if the student feels he or she is not naturally inclined to perform well there. Students who define themselves and their worth according to their achievement naturally avoid situations where achievement is unlikely. These students are, as Cross (1997) said, "unwilling to engage in risk-taking behaviors" (p. 184). In English classes, this often manifests as a refusal to complete difficult assignments or readings. For example, one of my top students came in to my class before school one day and handed me his copy of "The Fall of the House of Usher" by Edgar Allen Poe. He had clearly not read it as assigned; he told me defiantly, "I read like a paragraph and couldn't understand it, so I quit." Rather than face the fact he may not understand the text perfectly—a risk for him—he opted out of the assignment altogether. Another student, when asked about her missing paper, told me sheepishly, "I just know it's not good enough, so I just don't want to turn it in at all." This phenomenon is prevalent in advanced English classrooms, particularly, says Moore (2005) among students for whom AP English is already outside their comfort zone (p. 168). In the face of such resistance, it is easy as a teacher



to give in and try to maintain students' sense of self by encouraging only success and helping them avoid any possible failures. However, research consistently demonstrates that this is, in actuality, detrimental to students. They must learn to grapple with and overcome failure and frustration, and teachers can no longer protect them from these necessities.

### **III. THE FUNCTION OF FAILURE**

#### **The Necessity of Failure—Nurturing Growth Mindset**

In order to encourage failure, we must first understand what “failure” means in this context. Often, a teacher's concept of failure differs dramatically from his or her students' concept. Failure does not mean failing in the traditional sense of getting an “F” in a class, something that is to be avoided; rather, failure means the inability to do something to one's expectations on the first attempt. For some students, failure can mean a lower grade than he/she wanted (even a B is a failure to some students), or it can mean simply not understanding something in a text. When a teacher encourages a student to fail, then, he or she is simply acknowledging that the student may not master a given task on the first attempt. This seems common sense to most educators, but it can be very counterintuitive to students; many expect to be taught something in class and then to be able to replicate it exactly in their own work. In English classrooms, in particular, this can pose problems; there is simply no way to “replicate” voice in writing or reproduce a totally unique interpretation of a text. Students perceive these struggles as failures, which can lead to frustration. But these failures are, in fact, the very core of learning. As Miller says in her work, “Got it Wrong? Try Again. And Again” (2013), “Learning is about failure [. . .] As novices, they don't yet know that the path to understanding is cluttered, meandering, and protracted” (p. 50-51). The job of the teacher is to teach them this.

The impetus for promoting failure has arisen from new understanding of mindsets regarding ability. In education, experts are increasingly looking for ways to help students perform better, graduate more often, and move on to postsecondary education opportunities. When examining students' attitudes toward intelligence and ability, researchers have discovered two main "mindsets," or ways of thinking about these ideas. In one group researchers discovered something they term a fixed mindset. A fixed mindset, according to Dweck (2013) is the belief that ability is a fixed, stable quantity (p. 20). Students with this mindset see intelligence as something innate and therefore unchangeable—some students are born good at school, others are not. This mindset encourages students to see failure and frustration as integral to their sense of worth; a student who receives a poor grade on a paper likely got that grade because he or she is not very smart, or at least not very good at English. Under this mindset, learning is not about acquiring new skills, but rather about tapping into existing ability. Fixed mindset also encourages students to stick to what know; those with fixed mindsets are often "afraid to take risks because they don't want to look like they're deficient in their abilities or their talents" (Dweck, 2013, p. 17). Teachers hear fixed mindset comments daily when students say, "I just don't get it" or even the seemingly benign, "I'm just not a math/English/science person." Such comments promote the idea that some people just naturally *get* things because they are born with the ability to do so. Students with a fixed mindset often have an inability to overcome academic challenges because when "they are confronted with continued failures [. . .] they conclude that they simply can't succeed" (Yeager, 2013, p. 65). Failure is personal. These students are more prone to quitting and underperformance—they tell themselves they cannot do it so they simply do not do it. This is a particular challenge in English courses; students with fixed mindsets often seek simple paths out of their failures, and when such paths are not readily available—when they have to create

their own—they are more likely to stop trying (Yeager, 2013, p. 64). Many gifted students are, in particular, prone to this mindset. According to Delisle's (2002) work on educating gifted students, many of these students are especially prone to fixed mindset behavior (p. 103). Having always been good at school, many start to believe they were just *born* that way; having not been confronted with academic failure often, they have little idea how to handle it when they do confront it.

The alternative to fixed mindset is called a growth mindset, and it is this that teachers need to actively promote in their classrooms. While people may be inherently inclined more toward either a fixed or growth mindset based on their personalities, mindsets are, says Dweck (2013), “things that people can learn” (p. 17). Growth mindset is the belief that ability, intelligence, and understanding are flexible entities that can be expanded. Growth mindset “promotes challenge seeking and resilience because it’s oriented toward learning, not measuring the self” (Dweck, 2013, p. 17). When students view intelligence as immutable, they are less inclined to work hard to improve; they see little point in such measures because ability is innate therefore unchangeable. Those with a growth mindset, however, understand that they can get better. Promoting growth mindset does not mean, as many well-intentioned people believe, that teachers should uniformly praise students for “trying” or simply encourage students to just “try harder.” Failure and frustration in an AP English classroom are rarely the result of not trying. When working with motivated students who want to succeed, simply trying harder will not produce different results; these students are *already* trying hard. Instead, failure and frustration are more typically the result of students using the wrong strategy when attempting a new skill. A student reading a poem for the first time and not understanding it probably does not need to simply read it again and “try.” After all, what does “trying harder” look like when a student is

trying to figure out the symbolism inherent in a poem like “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” or “Ode on a Grecian Urn”? Instead, the student likely needs a new reading strategy—performing a TPCAST or SCOUT reading of the text would be more helpful than just reading the poem straight through, for example, and expecting to “get” it.<sup>23</sup> Students with fixed mindsets would resist these strategies; they may already have decided that these poems are simply too hard or that they just are not smart enough. Accepting help in the form of learning new strategies may be a sign of defeat. Students with growth mindsets, however, embrace these strategies and the help that comes along with them. They believe in their own potential to grow. As a teacher, it is not much of a challenge to guess which student may ultimately succeed in understanding the poems.

The research bears out the fact that those with growth mindsets do better academically than those with fixed mindsets. Yeager looked at achievement gaps in AP classrooms; as these courses saw increasing diversity, they also saw an increase in the number of students who struggled initially. Many of the students felt out of place in such classrooms because they did not have a history of being in advanced courses. Yeager (2013) found that “in rigorous, randomized experiments, even relatively brief messages and exercises designed to reinforce this *growth mindset* improved student achievement over several months” (p. 63). Students who believed they could get better *did* get better. Reinforcing growth mindset means reinforcing and orchestrating time for failure and frustration—teaching students to “view struggles in school not as a threat [. . .] but as an opportunity to grow and learn” (Yeager, 2013, p. 63). While this may seem like an optimistic ideal, it is, in fact, simply good science. Miller (2013) reported that repeated studies

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<sup>23</sup> TPCAST and SCOUT are two reading strategies promoted by the College Board for breaking down poetry. Both are mnemonic devices to help students remember the steps to go through in their analysis. TPCAST promotes the steps of Title, Paraphrase, Connotation, Attitude, Shifts, and Themes. SCOUT asks students to look for Specific Details, Comparisons, Organization, Unusual Traits, and Theme/Tone. Both strategies, along with resources for teaching them, can be found on the College Board’s AP Literature and Composition resources page.

on learning and mindsets have demonstrated that “true learning depends on our tolerance threshold, upon how long we can wrestle with doubt” (p. 51). Doubt is frustrating and many students try at all costs to avoid it; however, those who learn to live with doubt and see it as a growth opportunity succeed at higher rates than those who seek to avoid such situations.

Learning is risky; being in an Advanced Placement class is often risky. Students simply must learn to view these risks as a necessary part of education, but—as many students resist these situations—that can only happen if we as teachers force them to take these risks and grapple with uncertainty and failure.

### **Encouraging Failure and Frustration**

First and foremost, when orchestrating opportunities for frustration and failure, teachers must divorce those failures from students’ grades. Cassandra Erkens (2007), a leading educational expert on the use of homework and grading policies, argues that the work a student does when first learning a skill should not be graded. Grading work when a student is still learning a skill, she argues, is akin to evaluating a person’s ability to ride a bike based on the first time they get on one (p. 3). Our society instinctively understands that such skills take time and cannot be judged until they are mastered—this is why teens are required to complete hours of behind the wheel training before they are tested for their driver’s license—yet educators do not frequently give this same common-sense approach to their students. Many teachers, says Erkens (2007), worry that “If I don’t grade it, kids won’t do it” (p. 2). But research does not bear this out: students will complete work if they see its value toward their final goal, whether that be mastering a skill or achieving a certain grade in the course (Brookhart, 2011, p. 28). In fact, students are more willing, at times, to complete work in which that learning and risk is consequence free. My student who refused to read the Poe story, for example, was willing to do

it when I handed it back to him, explaining that all he needed to do was try to get the basics and come to class with his areas of confusion marked, and that he would not be graded that day. During class discussion, he was the most vocal in attempting to parse out the language that initially confused him; once reading the story was risk-free, he was less anxious and therefore less defensive. Teachers need to acknowledge the reality of their students' lives—grades *do* matter, and so if teachers want their students to be willing to fail, separating that failure from an undesirable outcome or consequence can relieve pressure on the students and send the message that failure and frustration need not be anxiety-producing events. When students know their practice is risk-free in terms of grades, they are more likely to “accept opportunities for challenge” (Erkens, 2007, p. 4). By acknowledging the fact that many gifted students are already under intense pressure, and working to alleviate some of that pressure, AP English teachers can set a precedent that learning is not always high stakes, and that frustration will not always necessarily entail irreversible consequences.<sup>24</sup>

There is, of course, a caveat to this strategy; almost all teachers in the United States will be forced, at some point, to provide a grade for a student. Students in AP English will, most likely, take a high-stakes test at the end of the year. What Erkens advocates is not the absence of all grading, but rather the absence of grading *initial* learning. When students are first learning to break down difficult poetry, for example, teachers may be better off assigning the difficult work—even knowing that they students may fail in their understanding at first—and then engaging with that frustration without assigning grades. When students have had sufficient practice—when they have had sufficient opportunity to overcome their initial frustration—then a teacher should assess the student and provide a grade. By ensuring students have had ample time

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<sup>24</sup> This is, truthfully, advice that applies to any good teaching, whether working with gifted students or not. Erkens's work focuses on the grade/learning divide as necessary at any level of education, but it is particularly important for teachers of AP classes to remember, as those classes are routinely more grade- and results-driven.

to learn the skills, the teacher ensures that early failures and struggles lead to ultimate success; students in turn learn that frustration and failure are not insurmountable obstacles, but rather natural parts of the learning process. Students should not be exempt from mastering a skill or being tested on it; after all, as Dweck (2013) points out, “There are situations in life where you have to demonstrate your ability [. . .] Sometimes you absolutely have to perform well” (p. 20). But students are more likely to perform well in these situations if they have been given ample prior practice, and they will be more inclined to engage in this practice if the risks are lower.

Lowering the stakes of failure is a concrete way of making students feel safe and supported in the classroom, a key component necessary in any room where failure is to be welcomed as a challenge rather than feared as a consequence. Students, particularly gifted students who can be hypersensitive and critical, need to feel that their classrooms are accepting and welcoming. This is a difficult task in AP classrooms where competition is often fierce. Students need to not only trust each other, but their teacher, as well. In conducting surveys of students in advanced classrooms, Yeager (2013) found that “even a little mistrust can harm a student’s learning” (p. 63). This is particularly true of students who may feel out of place in the AP classroom already, students who may be a part of programs like AVID, for example, for whom this may be their first advanced course. Minority and low-income are particularly susceptible to these types of anxieties, and when they “feel unwelcome in their classes, [they] may become unmotivated and disinterested in learning” (Moore, 2005, p. 170). To complicate this even further, AP English courses tend to be largely discussion and seminar based, encouraging students to share their thinking and interpretations verbally with the rest of the class; thus, any “wrong” answers or failures are public. The onus falls on the teacher then to actively *promote* wrong answers, to orchestrate situations where students must struggle together

collectively, even publically, and send a clear message to students that such struggle is welcome in the classroom. Other students are often more comfortable being wrong when they see that other students have also been incorrect. It lessens the impulse to negatively compare themselves others and alleviates the sometimes-crushing “fear of embarrassment” many students report feeling when it comes to failure (Miller, 2013, p. 51).<sup>25</sup>

Miller (2013) suggests teachers “normalize difficulty by asking questions like, where did you struggle? and how are you working to solve these problems?” (p. 51). This does not seem revolutionary, but to many gifted students, it feels as though it is. Being asked to read something difficult and do nothing more than *identify confusion* is a liberating experience. Many English students come to class feeling as though they need to have a fully defined analysis or interpretation of the text. When reading something overwhelmingly difficult—*Paradise Lost* for example—such a goal is unrealistic for most eighteen year old students, even gifted ones. Kelly Gallagher (2004) advocates for asking students to annotate a text by marking places where they got lost and writing questions they can ask their classmates to help them clarify their confusion (p. 154). This communicates to students that the material is difficult and that they are *expected* to struggle. When they are frustrated, then, they view it not as a failure on their part—“my teacher expected me to *get this*”—but as natural and therefore safe. By encouraging students to share their frustrations in class, frustration is seen as normal, even universal. Students learn understanding is something they develop over time, not something with which they are born. Subtle messages like this have been shown to increase not only student trust in their classrooms, but student achievement, retention of information, and performance on assessments (Yeager,

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<sup>25</sup> Many teachers, when students are publically wrong, feel the urge to praise wrong answers—to give partial credit for a “good idea” or “nice try,” but this is detrimental. While corrections should be made diplomatically and kindly, praising a wrong answer reinforces the idea that “wrong” is something to be avoided and that being right is the only desirable outcome in that class.



2013, p. 63). The process is deceptively simple, but creating dissonant experiences like this requires careful management on the part of the teacher (Miller, 2013, p. 52). If teachers want students to come to class and verbalize frustration, they need to make sure the students will *experience* frustration; encouraging questions but then assigning a text that is readily understandable teaches students the teacher does not really mean that it is okay to be confused; the teacher pays lip service to the idea, but then orchestrates situations that prevent it. Assign texts or tasks students will truly grapple with; this requires the teacher to be fully aware of the students' current abilities as well as to have a fair awareness of what skills are likely to cause frustration.<sup>26</sup>

Once frustration is normalized, teachers need to actively provide pathways out of the frustration. In English classrooms, pathways may look less like roads, however, and more like vehicles. In other words, English teachers should provide tools to help students work through their frustration. In the woolly world of interpretation, teachers can provide direct instruction on symbolism, motifs, characterization, and tone, but ultimately, these are tools for the student only; each student will need to develop his or her own ability to interpret a text. Each student's interpretation will look subtly different, and while teachers understand that is okay, many students resist this, particularly students experiencing frustration who simply want to find the "right" answer. Modeling behavior becomes crucial, then, for student learning. If a teacher wants students to learn how to overcome frustration, he or she should *show* them how to overcome it by modeling their own process. Miller (2013) advocates for "modeling the initial false starts that come with learning" (p. 51). This can feel risky for teachers—Miller is encouraging them to be

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<sup>26</sup> Unfortunately, no magic guide for this exists. Pre-assessments can help, but only they cannot fully replace a teacher's sense of his or her students. Teachers must get to know their students and their students' strengths and weaknesses. Anticipating confusion is easier with repetition. After teaching *A Tale of Two Cities* for four years for example, a teacher can accurately predict which chapters and characters may be problematic.

wrong in front of their students. Yet, it sends a message to the class: even so-called experts are still learning and growing. Once again this reinforces growth mindset by demonstrating that knowledge is not something a person has but rather something a person develops. Gallagher (2005) urges the writing teacher, for example, to write with her or his class (p. 46). Modeling gives students the ability to watch someone “work through the initial discomfort of situations that don’t make sense” (Miller, 2013, p. 51). Once again, this normalizes frustration and failure while simultaneously showing students how to work through those processes.

Finally students are ready to start tackling these tasks and practicing their skills, and here is where teachers get to their most important strategies: high expectations and critical feedback. Often, when students are facing frustration, teachers want to reassure them that they *are* smart enough, talented enough, or otherwise capable of succeeding. In the rush to do this, teachers accept mediocre work and praise it lavishly. Students, however, are often decent gauges of their own work, and gifted students in particular tend to see through this empty praise and identify it for what it really is: false and pitying. This does students no favors. Instead, praising mediocre work sends the students a dangerous message: this is as good as the teacher thinks he or she can do (Jackson, 2009, p. 85). What starts with good intentions can actually communicate incredibly damaging messages about students’ abilities. Yeager (2013) found in his study that “being told that a teacher believes that she can meet a higher standard can be a powerful motivator” (p. 64). In fact, students who were held to higher standards and consistently told they could do better overwhelmingly lived up to these expectations, raising their grades and general abilities over time (Yeager, 2013, p. 63). Rather than frustrating students, high standards communicates to them that their teacher believes in them, as well as that learning is something to work for, not something that comes naturally. This faith in students is critical, but not always easy. Certainly,

being a teacher dealing with a class of 30 increasingly frustrated students who just do not “get” “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” can be an unpleasant experience; this year, while students discussed the poem in my AP Literature and Composition course, one student slammed his literature book closed and told his group disgustedly, “This is *impossible!* How am I supposed to know why the hell he keeps talking about Michelangelo?!” My first instinct as a teacher was to soothe his frustration, to go to his group and try to explain it, but I resisted. As much as I did not want him to feel frustrated with what he perceived as his failure to understand the poem, I wanted more for him to push through his frustration and know that he *could* figure this out on his own. He needed to learn the lesson that, as Miller (2013) says, “Error marks the place where education begins” (p. 50). As teachers, we must learn not to intervene with every frustration lest we unintentionally promote the idea that we do not expect our students to be able to accomplish this task on their own. He did eventually open his book, and he did eventually come up with his own interpretation—one that he willingly and proudly shared with the class. To have lowered expectations—to have given him an out when he struggled—would have been to demonstrate to him that I did not believe him capable.

Finally, in order to communicate these expectations to students, teachers must not fear offering critical feedback to students. English teachers are used to commenting on papers and student work, but providing critical feedback is something quite different from the typical comments. Critical feedback is “oriented toward strategy, toward [. . .] process praise or process feedback” (Dweck, 2013, p.17). Rather than telling students something either works or does not work, for example, the teacher provides concrete strategies to help the students improve. Rather than commenting that a particular interpretation feels obvious or shallow, the teacher may direct the students to a particular place in the text or encourage the student to use a particular reading

strategy taught in class. Such feedback communicates high expectations—the student needs to dig deeper—while providing a guide for how to get there. If, says Dweck (2013), teachers want their students to improve, they have “got to teach them this is the way to get better, and [they] need to give feedback on precisely where their process was good and where their process needs improvement” (p. 18). Do not, Dweck admonishes, let students off the hook for shoddy work, but do not expect them to figure out how to improve on their own, either. When students are learning about voice, for example, feedback telling them to “vary their syntax more” is frustratingly vague; more helpful is telling a student, “You use a lot of complex sentences with introductory phrases, which is repetitive. Try to insert some simple sentences for emotional impact or reverse the order of your complex ones to prevent your writing from falling into a pattern.” Does such feedback take longer? Certainly, but if teachers have willfully orchestrated frustration in their classrooms, then the burden falls to them to provide feedback and strategies to help students get through it. As students become more adept at handling their own frustrations, teachers can back off a bit; students will learn to ask for help when they need it and to monitor their own processes.

Encouraging failure is so simple it feels obvious, but it is something few teachers actively pursue, particularly in the high stakes world of Advanced Placement. But study after study shows that students do better and perform better on assessments when they have been encouraged to face possible failure and deal with their learning frustrations. Once grades are separated from the initial learning tasks and students feel safe in the classroom to take risks, once confusion and failure are normalized as a part of the learning process, and once students are forced to meet high expectations through the reception of critical feedback, students will be truly ready to engage in real learning, as messy, chaotic, and sometimes confusing as that can sometimes be.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The same student who came to me crying after her first test—which she aced, by the way—recently got her first paper back in AP Literature & Composition; it was a C. She earned a whopping 76%. This young woman informed me that she had never gotten a score lower than an A- on a paper, and she was suitably shocked to see this grade now. But she said this without tears. She said this, in fact, with a smile on her face as she sat on a stool next to my desk, paper spread before us. She said this and then asked, “So, can you help me fix it?”

We need our high-achieving students to feel comfortable asking this question. We need them to see that they do not need to know everything—and they especially do not need to know everything right away. When they learn that they *can learn*, that they can grow and get better, the world of learning opens up before them. And when these high-achieving students learn to take their failures in stride and simply keep working to get better, they set an important precedent within our schools: everyone needs to work hard, and that is okay. They become role models and agents for change, and they do so without even actively knowing they are doing it. When students understand that learning is a process that we rarely master on our first attempt, they allow themselves the freedom to really develop. Educators understand the importance of this—that is why so many are talking about how to teach growth mindset—but when we neglect to examine the importance of this with our highest-achieving students, we are subtly—but definitively—reinforcing a *fixed* mindset. When we talk about growth mindset only in conjunction with our students who struggle, the message we send is that *gifted kids do not need this because they naturally have the ability to succeed already*. Educational pedagogy needs to be clear: *everyone* works hard, and everyone fails sometimes. Failure need no longer be the new “f” word.

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