

By Guile Committed

“Theft was a secretive and deceitful crime. It is therefore understandable that the dragon is described as "besyre(d)", that he is plundered while asleep, and that the crime is committed "by guile"". (Andersson 1984)



“Here we meet, among other things, the first example of the motive (to become dominant in Hobbits) that the great policies of world history, ‘the wheels of the world’, are often turned not by the Lords and Governors, even gods, but by the seemingly unknown and weak.” (Tolkien 1981, Letter to Milton Waldman)

- ❖ Theft is a crime that can be committed by anyone, it does not rely on strength of arms or great power, only on cunning and bravery. In this way the role of the heroic thief is perfect for Tolkien’s “unknown and weak” heroes.
- ❖ However the thief is also a stigmatized figure, especially in the laws and literature of the Anglo-Saxons.
- ❖ Tolkien, who was a professor of Anglo-Saxon, first at Leeds and then at Oxford, for most of his adult life, was shaped by their language and poetry.
- ❖ The epic poem Beowulf, which he finished a translation of shortly before beginning to write The Hobbit, had an especially clear influence on Middle-earth.
- ❖ The thief in Beowulf takes similar actions to Bilbo, however unlike Bilbo the thief is an outcast of the lowest social station.

Looking At Theft Like an Anglo-Saxon

“On one level, the thief is condemned for his furtive means of operation as he encounters the rest of society in the most discrete manner possible: he enters into the private domain of other people, but is uninvited and his presence is often unknown. Even after acquiring the desired goods clandestinely, the thief must live in secrecy, as any public use or display of the stolen goods would doubtlessly result in his accusation and criminal trial. Such secrecy ultimately connotes shame, leading to theft's association with the private practices of sorcery, witchcraft, and treachery against one's lord. Simply, deeds that cannot be done publicly must be coupled with twisted motives and deceit.” (Hamilton 2008)

- ❖ Theft was uniquely punished in Anglo-Saxon law. (Attenborough 2021)
 - “If anyone slays a man in the act of thieving no wergeld shall be paid for him.” (Laws of Wihtred)
 - “If a man from afar, or a stranger, quits the road and neither shouts, nor blows a horn, he shall be assumed to be a thief, [and as such] may be either slain or put to ransom.” (Laws of Wihtred)
 - “No thief shall be spared, who is seized in the act, if he is over 12 years old and [if the value of the goods is] more than 8 pence.” (Laws of Æthelstan)
 - “He who captures a thief or has a captured thief given into his custody, and allows him to escape, or suppresses knowledge of the theft, shall pay for the thief according to his wergeld.” (Laws of Ine)
- ❖ Theft, or taking something in secret, was treated differently than robbery, or taking something in the open.
 - J.R Schwyter’s analysis of theft related words in Old English legal texts found the most common word roots to be “þeof-” and “stel-”, ‘thief’ and ‘steal’ respectively. There were 103 instances of “þeof-” words in the legal codes and lawsuit documents analyzed, along with 62 instances of “stel-” words. In comparison there were only 19 instances of “reaf-”; the root word for rob. (Schwyter 1996)
 - “The difference is confirmed by passages in the sagas which indicate that to be a ránsma r 'robber' was a straightforward matter, but to be a þjófr 'thief' was a disgrace” (Andersson 1984)
- ❖ Legal penalties for theft went hand in hand with social penalties.
 - “...theft and homicide are not really comparable cases; they fall on opposite sides of a fundamental division between open, honourable offences and dishonourably secret ones.”(Lambert 2012)
- ❖ Thieves in fiction were also figures of pity or disgust.

A thief must go forth in murky weather. The monster must dwell in the fen, alone in his realm. The female, the woman, must visit her lover with secret cunning—if she has no wish to prosper among her people so that someone will purchase her with rings.

–Maxims II (Bradley 1995)

Two Ways of Reading Beowulf

Tolkien's Translation

—until a certain one in the dark nights began to hold sway, a dragon, even he who on the high heath watched his hoard, his steep stone-barrow; below lay a path little known to men. Therein went some nameless man, creeping in nigh to the pagan treasure; his hand seized on a goblet deep, bright with gems. This the dragon did not after in silence bear, albeit he had been cheated in his sleep by the thief's cunning. This the people learned, men of the neighbouring folk, that he was wroth indeed.

By no means of intent had that man broken the dragon's hoard of his own will, he who thus wronged him grievously; but in dire need, being the thrall of some one among the sons of mighty men, he had fled the lashes of wrath, and having no house he crept therein, a man burdened with guilt.

....

Then filled with grief and rage the lord of the Geats with 11 companions went to look upon the dragon: already he learned whence those deeds of enmity and dire hatred of men had sprung—into his possession had come the splendid and precious vessel by the hand of the spy: he was in that company the thirteenth man who had wrought the beginning of that warfare, a captive with a gloomy heart he now must in shame show the way thence over the land. Against his will he went to where he knew a solitary hall of earth, a vault under the ground, nigh the surges of the deep and the warring waves.

(J. R. R. Tolkien 2014)

Heaney's Translation

—until one began
to dominate the dark, a dragon on the prowl
from the steep vaults of a stone-roofed barrow
where he guarded a hoard; there was a hidden
passage
unknown to men, but someone managed
to enter by it and interfere
with the heathen trove. He had handled and
removed
a gem-studded goblet; it gained him nothing
though with a thief's wiles he had outwitted
the sleeping dragon; that drove him into rage
as the people of that country would soon discover

The intruder who broached the dragon's treasure
and moved him to wrath had never meant to.
It was desperation on the part of a slave
fleeing the heavy hand of some master,
guilt-ridden and on the run,
going to ground. But he soon began
to shake with terror

....

The lord of the Geats took eleven comrades
and went in a rage to reconnoiter.
By then he had discovered the cause of the affliction
being visited on the people. The precious cup
had come to him from the hand of the finder,
the one who had started all this strife
and was now added as a thirteenth to their number.
They press-ganged and compelled this poor creature
to be their guide. Against his will
he led them to the earth vault he alone knew,
an underground barrow near the sea-billows and
heaving waves, heaped inside
(Heaney 2001)

Original Old English

...eald eþelweard– oððæt ān ongan
deorcum nihtum draca rīcsian
sē ðe on hēaum hofe hord beweotode,
stān-beorh stēapne: stīg under læg
eldum uncūð. þær on innan gīong
niða **nāt-hwylc**, gefeng
hæðnum horde, hond
since fāhne hē þæt syððan
þēah ðe hē slæpende **besyred** wurde
þeofes cræfte; þæt sīe ðīod onfand,
bū-folc beorna, þæt hē gebolgen wæs.

Nealles mid gewældum wýrm-hord ābræc
sylfes willum, sē ðe him **sare gesceod**,
ac for **þræa-nēdlan þeow** nāt-hwylces
hæleða bearna hete-swengeas flēoh,
ærnes þearfa, ond ðær inne fealh,
secg **synbysig**. Sōna onfunde
þæt..... ðam gyste gryrebrōga stōd;
hwæðre **earm-sceapen**
.....sceapen
.....þa hyne se fær begeat.
sincfæt..... þær wæs swylcra fela

.....

Gewāt þā twelfa sum, torne gebolgen
dryhten Gēata dracan scēawian.
Hæfde þā gefrūnen hwanan sīo fæhð ārās,
bealo-nīð biorna; him tō bearne cwōm
māðþum-fæt mære þurh ðæs meldan hond.
Sē wæs on ðām ðrēate þrēottēoða secg,
sē ðæs orleges or onstealde,
hæft hyge-giōmor, sceolde **hēan** ðonon
wong wisian. Hē ofer willan gīong
tō ðæs ðe hē eorðsele ānne wisse,
hlæw under hrūsan holm-wylme nēh
(Heaney 2001)

nathwylc: someone, I don't know who

besyred: tricked

þeofes cræfte: thieves craft

sare gesceod: poorly shod, lacking shoes

þreanedlan: oppressed

þeow: slave

synbysig: troubled by guilt

earmsceapen: miserable

hæft: imprisoned

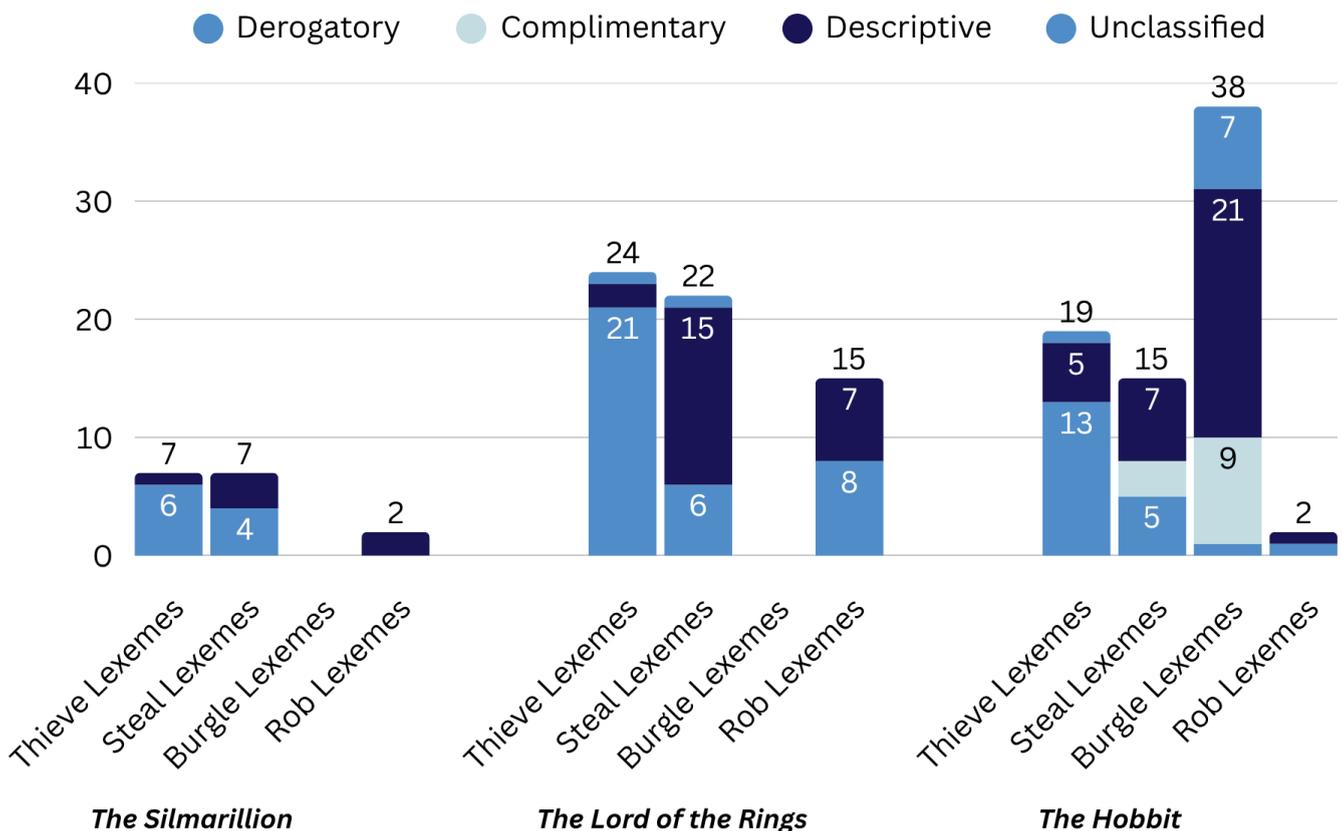
hygegiomor: sorrowful

hean: poor

(Andersson 1984, Bosworth 2014)

Conclusion: A thief cannot be happy or heroic
in the Anglo-Saxon canon, their status is
entwined with suffering.

Frequency of Lexeme Groups in *The Silmarillion*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Hobbit*



Classification uses four categories of theft-words: “thieve”, “steal”, “burgle”, and “rob”, then searched for instances of both the lexeme and some derivative words. The specific word lists used were “thief, thieve, thieves, thieved, theft, thieving”, “steal, steals, stealing, stole, stolen, stealest”, “burglar, burglars, burgle, burgled, burgling, burglary”, and “rob, robs, robbed, robbing, robber, robbery.” After being collated words were sorted according to the tone with which they were used. If used in either direct or reported dialogue to denigrate or impugn, it was classified as derogatory–this included instances where characters sought to avoid a label due to its perceived negative connotations. If used in a positive manner in direct or reported dialogue it was complimentary. If they simply described a person or action, or was not directly connected to a character voice, it was descriptive. Instances where the tone was too complex to place were labelled unclassified.

Reconciling Theft and Stigma

- ❖ Stigma against theft clearly present in Middle-earth as well
 - Boromir: “I will not go forth as a thief in the night.” (“The Ring Goes South.”)
 - Bilbo: “I’m not a thief, whatever he said.” (“A Long-Expected Party.”)
 - Bard the Bowman: “We are not thieves.” (“The Gathering of the Clouds.”)
- ❖ Euphemisms allow for theft to exist in conjunction with heroism in Middle-earth.
 - “Burglar” in *The Hobbit* functions as a euphemism. The burglar can be referred to positively where the thief can not be.
 - “A really first-class and legendary burglar would at this point have picked the trolls’ pockets—it is nearly always worthwhile, if you can manage it— pinched the very mutton off the spits, purloined the beer, and walked off without their noticing him. Others more practical but with less professional pride would perhaps have stuck a dagger into each of them before they observed it. Then the night could have been spent cheerily.” (*The Hobbit* 2023. “Roast Mutton.”)
 - Other euphemisms are used as well.
 - Beren and Lúthien “bear out of Angband” (“Of Beren and Lúthien”) a Silmaril. Frodo “trespasses after” mushrooms (“Shortcut to Mushrooms.”)
 - A thief by any other name escapes the taint of Anglo-Saxon social convention.
- ❖ Other means employed to shift the moral tenor of theft: notably self-incrimination
 - Bilbo names himself to Gollum before taking the Ring (“Riddles In the Dark”), Lúthien “named her own name” prior to casting Morgoth into sleep (“Of Beren and Lúthien”).
 - Actions of trickery taken in the open escape some of the connotations of dishonor.
- ❖ Class also plays a large role, by positioning his hero thieves as royalty or local gentry, the “wretchedness” of Beowulf’s thief is sidestepped.
- ❖ Finally, the redistribution of treasure aids in softening the image of Tolkien’s thieves.
 - Bilbo willingly gives up the Ring and his remaining plunder to retire in solitude. Beren and Lúthien steal only to get married and hold the Silmaril for a brief time.

Conclusion: Though heroic burglars and daring jewel heists may seem at odds with the historical sources which drove Tolkien’s career and inspired his writing, Anglo-Saxon social views of theft are deeply embedded in Middle-earth. Heroic thieves exist in the text in delicate balance with stigmatization, a balance maintained by the elision of theft and the openness with which his heroes go about doing their stealing.

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