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## Tom Bombadil's Last Song: Tolkien's "Once Upon A Time"

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

### **Tom Bombadil's Last Song: Tolkien's "Once Upon A Time"**

*Kris Swank (bio)*

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"Once Upon A Time" (1965) is one of J.R.R. Tolkien's last original poems to

be published during his lifetime. “For W.H.A.” was published in 1967. “Bilbo’s Last Song”, revised around 1968 from an earlier poem, was published posthumously in 1974.<sup>1</sup> It is surprising, then, that such a late work has received so little critical attention. “Once Upon A Time” (hereafter referred to as “Once”) poses intriguing mysteries, such as the date of its creation and the interpretation of its content. It is hoped that analyzing these aspects of the poem may yield some insight into Tolkien’s later work and life.

“Once Upon a Time” is Tolkien’s third poem (independent of *The Lord of the Rings*) to feature the character Tom Bombadil. Both “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil” and “Bombadil Goes Boating” appeared in *The Adventures of Tom Bombadil and Other Verses from the Red Book* (hereafter, *Bombadil*) in 1962. The first poem was revised from an earlier version published in *The Oxford Magazine* in 1934, while the second was written especially for *Bombadil*. “Once” was first published in October 1965 in the anthology *Winter’s Tales for Children*, edited by Caroline Hillier. It was accompanied by another Tolkien poem, “The Dragon’s Visit,” which was revised from an earlier version published in *The Oxford Magazine* in 1937. Both poems were reprinted in the 1969 anthology *The Young Magicians*, edited by Lin Carter. Since both anthologies in which the poem appeared are out of print, “Once” is reproduced in its entirety as an appendix to this essay.

## Dating the Poem

Without definitive evidence, scholars have only been able to speculate as to when “Once” was written. Christina Scull and Wayne G. Hammond state that it was “evidently written at least after [the 1934 poem “The Adventures of Tom Bombadil”], and probably after [*The Lord of the Rings*]” in 1955 (ll: 689). It is possible that “Once” was created during Tolkien’s early stages of poetic output in the 1920s–30s. During that period, he was experimenting with lyric verse forms and whimsical creatures, such as in the original versions of “The Man in the Moon Stayed Up Too Late”<sup>2</sup> and “The Mewlips.”<sup>3</sup> Jay Ruud finds the mysterious

creatures in “Once”—the lintips—a “fanciful invention... reminiscent of Tolkien’s very early poetry” (325). Allan Turner, although he does not mention “Once,” points out: **[End Page 185]**

Tolkien wrote most of his independent poems in the earlier part of his life, mainly from the beginning of his student days to the mid-1930s. The ones that were chosen to appear in [*Bombadil*] date mostly from his Leeds and early Oxford period. . . . His verse production seems to have petered out as he became more involved in writing the prose tales which form the major part of his work.

(3)

While this observation could suggest an early date of composition, Turner mentions that two of *Bombadil*’s poems were written later. “Cat” was composed in 1956 and “Bombadil Goes Boating” was written for *Bombadil* early in 1962 (Turner 3). Tolkien’s poetic output may have tapered off in later years, but it had not ceased. Although “Once” might have been originally written in the 1920s or 1930s, there is more convincing evidence that the poem was written later.

Around the beginning of October 1961, Tolkien’s aunt, Jane Neave, asked if he “wouldn’t get out a small book with Tom Bombadil at the heart of it” (Carpenter 244). Tolkien replied, “I think your idea about Tom Bombadil is a good one, not that I feel inclined to write any more about him. But I think that the original poem . . . might make a pretty booklet” (*Letters* 308). Rayner Unwin liked the project, too. Unwin asked Tolkien to send all the poems he could find to make up a book of reasonable size. In mid-November that year, Tolkien replied that he had “copies made of any poems that might conceivably see the light or (somewhat tidied up) be presented again. The harvest is not rich, for one thing, there...

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