Jennifer Norman

**Besting Billy: Re-Examining the Role of Women in *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid***

**Introduction**

Since its publication in 1970, Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* has been studied primarily for its documentary form. Some have called his female characters underdeveloped and, in some instances, “objectified” (Thomson i). Shannon Emmerson (1997) says that Ondaatje merely offers a “gesture” (7) toward an examination of female roles in several of his texts; however, he ends up “grappling with the difficulties of representing women, while ultimately regarding himself as unable to overcome them” (4). Contrarily, I posit that these critics have not applied a thorough reading of *The Collected Works* through Ondaatje’s use of contradictions as a mode to question readers’ understanding, and repudiation, of truth with a capital “T.” It is through this lens that one sees Angela Dickinson and Sallie Chisum are not one-sided adversaries vying for Billy’s affections, but fully capable women who share many of the same qualities, yet are distinct in their own right.

By exploring the role of women in *The Collected Works*, I will address some key points that either do not appear or are glossed over in the literature. Namely, that Ondaatje seems to delight in contradictions. He consistently and repeatedly pulls the reader into one interpretation, and then turns that interpretation on its head. This alone is reason to question not what the women are, but why. That they appear at all—especially Angela, a fictional (no pun intended) character—begs for interpretation. And as Douglas Barbour keenly notes in his biography, *Michael Ondaatje* (1993), the plethora of critical analyses surrounding *The Collected Works* proves “how open to reader responses this text
is, and how easily it can be turned to a particular critic’s ideological needs” (Barbour 36). This serves as fair warning to those who would be quick to make sweeping assumptions about Ondaatje’s motivations.

Another point is the lack, or misinterpretation, of positive readings of the female characters and their interactions within the text. More recently, critics such as Emmerson have offered glimpses of this, but there is little analysis of the women’s complementary nature. Most are concerned with citing only their differences. I believe this is what has perpetuated the negativity, especially with regard to the Angela Dickinson character. And avoidance of an examination of the women as complete characters serves to further silence their autonomy. To simply shrug off Ondaatje as antifeminist, or make blanket statements easily summing up and categorizing the women—or any character—in *The Collected Works* is to do a disservice to the text.

Furthermore, Ondaatje revisits Sallie’s character in a poem in his collections, *There’s a Trick with a Knife I’m Learning to Do* (1979) and *The Cinnamon Peeler* (1989). In it, Sallie has another chance to voice her feelings, most of which are tinged with anger and sadness. This proves she was conceived as a person replete with emotions. It seems Ondaatje felt he needed to spell this out for readers who may not have recognized these qualities in *The Collected Works*.

**Critical Context**

In her thesis “The Changing Representation of Women in Michael Ondaatje’s Prose” (1993), Tracey Thomson outlines the evolving roles of Ondaatje’s female characters. She focuses mainly on the theme of binaries, which she says runs throughout several of Ondaatje’s texts. As Thomson notes, the glaring “omission in critical
discussion of the author’s breaking down of binaries is the opposition between men and women” (9). Her argument centers on the idea that in his early work, Ondaatje’s female characters are “mythologized…within traditional social constructs” (32). She takes him to task for not overtly dismantling this mythology in *The Collected Works* (1970) and other early texts. However, she says that Ondaatje makes up for this oversight in later works, such as *Running in the Family* (1982) and *In the Skin of a Lion* (1987).

Thomson also points out that Angie and Sallie only appear in relation to “their involvement with Billy, often explicitly sexual” and, unfortunately, many critics continue to “eagerly search for traces of the ‘erotic’ in” the women (20). She fears that they merely serve to “represent either protection or threat to Billy” (21) and have no identity apart from the one connected to a male figure. Further, Thomson says the analysis that persists through this lens only serves to reinforce the “traditional patriarchal classification of women” (25).

On the other hand, Shannon Emmerson’s thesis, “Negotiating the Boundaries of Gender: Construction and Representation of Women in the Work of Michael Ondaatje,” deviates from Thomson’s and others’ focus on binaries and “the female in comparison to the male” (Emmerson 9). Emmerson argues that Ondaatje “undermines…the typical codifications of the feminine” and “reflects an interest in and an awareness of the issues of gender” (9).

Emmerson also points to the theme of “edges” prevalent throughout the text. Billy is an outlaw, Angela is a prostitute, and Sally is the “maternal figure” who craves the “exotic” (Emmerson 15-17). They all exist outside the boundaries of society (Emmerson 14), an arena in which, theoretically, the female voice would be on par with the male’s.
There are two major flaws in *The Collected Works*, according to Emmerson. Though Ondaatje provides space for the female voice, it always is “filtered” (19) through a male voice. And Ondaatje fails to represent the “whole woman” in his descriptions of Angela (24).

Barbour states that the Ondaatje uses the documentary form is because of its “impulse…to listen to and re-present the voices” (7). It is an ideal medium for the women in Billy’s world to possess authority over their representations. Barbour recognizes that Sallie and Angela “break out beyond the borders of stereotyping” (Barbour 53).

On the other hand, he also reinforces the characterization of Angela D.’s as “the sexual angel” and Sallie “as the caring, mothering” figure (Barbour 53). Unfortunately, this is another instance in which the women’s descriptions are framed in regard to Billy. To be truly effective in capturing their essence, Barbour, and Ondaatje, must attend to the women’s character traits as separate entities.

Barbour does provide what could be considered an empowered reading of the bawdy song about Angela (TCW 64). He acknowledges that many critics have written about the “male gaze” and objectification of women through focus on specific body parts (59). However, here the attempt “fails” because, though the parts are separated, they remain powerful and “cannot tie Angela down” (59). In contrast, the scene in which the sun “rapes” Billy (Barbour 56) achieves more of a sense of victimization than any of the descriptions of the women.

In “Two Authors in Search of a Character: bp Nichol and Michael Ondaatje” (1972), Stephen Scobie compares two tales of Billy the Kid that appeared simultaneously. According to Scobie, Nichol’s *The True Eventual Story of Billy the Kid* [1970] is
primarily a joke, a clever and light-hearted skit, as opposed to the intense seriousness of Ondaatje’s approach” (Scobie, 226). Further, Scobie identifies the “international” appeal the Billy the Kid mythology carries, which explains its constant iterations (228). Scobie argues that the key difference between the two pieces is that Nichols “tells a joke,” whereas Ondaatje “creates a myth” (231).

Scobie says the apparatus Ondaatje uses to create this myth are the photo and the film. Ondaatje sneaks in cinematic allusions—for instance, Scobie points out that Angie Dickinson, whom Ondaatje posits as Billy’s lover in TCW, was the female lead in the film Point Blank (232). Scobie notes that Angela does not appear in any of the other integral works of biography on Billy. This, in itself, is reason to believe Angela’s character is a deviation from the script, so to speak, and deserves a closer look.

Scobie also categorizes The Collected Works in the Romantic tradition, which creates room for the use of poetry and the melding of the artist (Ondaatje) with the art (Billy) (233). Further, it paints Billy as an “outlaw-hero” (230).

Also, Scobie says, “…The scenes of control are (mainly, but not exclusively) associated with the Chisums and Angela D.” (237). These are “scenes of peace and companionship” (Scobie 234). Further, “Angela D. fits into this world” (Scobie 240). Descriptions such as these lend authority to the women’s voices.

In his essay, “Michael Ondaatje and the Problem of History,” Ajay Heble posits that Ondaatje’s “suspicion of history” frames his creation of Billy’s story (110). If, as Heble argues, The Collected Works truly is in part an autobiography, it follows that Ondaatje would incorporate aspects of the world around him, namely what would be considered the modern empowered female. According to Heble, Ondaatje presents “an
imaginative reconstruction of the past which insists that history *could have been* as Ondaatje presents it” (Heble 99). And to argue the opposite, it could not be, just as well. That is, if one person sees his presentation of women as inaccurate and sexist, it could just as easily be seen as feminist truth.

And in a further deconstruction of most critics’ focus on binaries, Heble pulls the scene when Sallie Chisum talks about the good/bad dualities both present in different ways in Billy and Pat Garrett (TCW 89). Heble says this shows “the impossibility of ever finally categorizing either Pat or Billy according to a system of binary oppositions” (108).

**Examination of Contradictions in the Text**

To examine Ondaatje’s work with an eye toward the problematic is to miss the point. Scobie reminds us that “fully as important as what *is* in the book is what is missed out” (Scobie 234). Consider some of Ondaatje’s key “omissions”: that the “real” Chisum and Billy had an acrimonious relationship because of their roles in the Lincoln County War, Billy’s cattle rustling, and the possibility that Chisum may have been involved in Pat Garrett’s hunt for Billy (238-239). In this vein of reading between the lines of what is real and what is reimagined, there is room for an argument about perceived and actual gender representations.

Reading *The Collected Works*, one is immediately aware that Ondaatje is playing with the concept that his is an accurate retelling of this mythical history. For instance, in the book’s credits, Ondaatje states that Paulita Maxwell and Sallie Chisum’s “reminiscences” are “made up” from another book; “the comic book legend is real”; and that he has “edited, rephrased, and slightly reworked” all of his source materials. This is before the actual first page, on which “an empty frame” rests above a description of what
seems to be text for a missing photograph (Jackson 7). One reading of this, according to Bruce Jackson, is that Ondaatje is saying, “‘I’m sending you an image, but you have to figure out what it looks like’” (8). This is not only an invitation to interpret the text, but Ondaatje’s way of setting the reader up to play his game. There is no reality (which, in this case, would be a real photo), but most readers will be quick to create one, which is exactly what Ondaatje wants to occur throughout. Furthermore, the narrator/Ondaatje plays with language in announcing, “Here then is a maze to begin, be in” (20). Aside from the fact that the author clearly is stating that this text is constructed as a labyrinth through which the reader must journey, it also implies that there will be wrong turns throughout that must be corrected or overcome to find one’s way out. Manina Jones, who studies the language of The Collected Works in her article, “Scripting the Docudrama,” says this is a call to the reader to begin “examining her own orientation in relation to the text, in finding a place for herself” (29). Ondaatje is again forcing readers to involve themselves in the book and, if he has his way, try to choose a side with which to ally.

Another instance in which the lines between real and surreal are blurred is the list of the killed (Ondaatje 6), where Billy admits murdering two of his supposed friends. Right off, we question what kind of friends these were that Billy would have killed them, and further, whether his definition of friendship differs from the norm. Later in the list, “a rabid cat,” “birds,” and “Angela D’s split arm” appear as a casualties (6). As these are not people, one wonders what was so important about these incidences that they are mentioned at all.

The description of Boot Hill is a source of contention on gender representation, according to Emmerson. There is a list of those buried, including two women’s graves,
“the only known suicides” (Ondaatje 9). That the author/narrator expressly points out these women have killed themselves could be read as an indictment on their character—they were weak and had no better way to handle a situation than through death. However, Emmerson posits that Ondaatje’s point is that these “are the only known suicides, implying that the men dead among them may have committed suicide in a less detectable manner” (15). Further, the descriptions of male deaths seem senseless and almost laughable—“brain haemorrhages from bar fights” and “10 killed in barbed wire” (Ondaatje 9).

Both Thomson and Emmerson argue that the female voices are “filtered” through other characters. However, according to Jones, Billy’s “interview” (Ondaatje 81-84), in which he supposedly “tells all,” was an authorial invention (Jones 33). What seems like a firsthand account of events is yet another warping of truth.

Near the end of the book, Paulita Maxwell attempts to set the record straight about her relationship, or lack thereof, with Billy. She refutes the “old story” that she was one of Billy’s paramours and questions the effects on her character saying, “Perhaps it honours me; perhaps not; it depends on how you feel about it” (Ondaatje 96). Paulita talks directly to readers and implicates them in the interpretation of her truth. And Ondaatje adds another layer to his hide-and-seek game. Then, in her recounting of her and Billy’s supposed elopement, she scoffs at the idea that they would share a mount: “I did not need to put my arms around any man’s waist to keep from falling off a horse. Not I” (Ondaatje 96). Here, Paulita uncovers the real story of women of the frontier, not the damsel in distress of the Western to which modern audiences are accustomed.
Juxtaposed directly afterward is the penultimate example of Ondaatje’s mocking our preconceptions in the nickel novel excerpt (98-102). Any bets that this is a serious attempt at historical accuracy are off as Ondaatje laughs with the reader at this piece of blatant Western machismo. However, even in this outlandish tale, the female character has more agency than Billy, because she “had chosen William H. Bonney to reign with her” (99). She is the one with the regal title, “La Princesa,” and allows him to rule “beside” her (99).

Finally, Poe tells Garrett, “I believe you have killed the wrong man” (Ondaatje 103). What should be Garrett’s moment of glory and triumph is oddly cut off with the accusation that he made a mistake. This leaves another door open as to the truth behind Billy’s life and death.

**Animal Imagery**

Scobie discusses the violence in *The Collected Works*, especially in reference to the animal imagery. Again, his point is that there is a fine balance in power, and how and by whom it is wielded. Sallie Chisum collects live animals and allows them to live on the property she seemingly shares with John, while Pat Garrett prefers them dead and stuffed. And John Chisum tells the story of a man who plays God with his dogs, and they turn on him. Ondaatje and Scobie seem to be saying that those who are perceived, or who perceive themselves, as able to control situations (in this instance, the men) suffer the consequences of their egos.

Emmerson focuses on the caged bird as a metaphor for the women, while Thomson says the animalistic descriptions attached to them prove they “threaten Billy with the chaos of wilderness” (42). However, in the scene on the porch (Ondaatje 67), the
cat, Ferns, is often described in relation to what the women are doing, and Angela seems to be perched catlike on the railing near Billy. Usually, this would be an easy formula to use: women = cats. But, one must consider the many concurrent roles female felines hold, such being hunters, mothers, and the keepers of social unity within a pride. Therefore, a one-sided interpretation of the animal imagery used in regard to specific characters does not hold water. And the idea that their “wilderness” would pose any threat to Billy is in opposition to his character. Throughout his mythology, he thrives on the unknown and purposely tries to create mystery about himself. How could he not be drawn to women with these similar characteristics?

**Analysis of Counterarguments**

Emmerson points to the frustrating dearth of analysis on any positive representations of women in *The Collected Works*. Her work provides a jumping-off point to discuss them apart from the men. This is where Emmerson breaks away from Thomson’s argument that Ondaatje does not flesh out his female characters until his later work. Why is Angela Dickinson primarily characterized as the “whore” to Sallie Chisum’s “Madonna” (Thomson 25)? Often, it is the misreading of the interactions between the two that leads to this “binary.”

One place that is ripe for misinterpretation is the scene that begins on the Chisums’ porch and ends with Billy waking up in bed with Angela (*TCW 67-71*). The “verandah is crowded” with the characters who represent Billy’s past, present, and future, and Billy’s “eyes are burning from the pain of change” (*TCW 68*). Sallie is the familiar, the “maternal figure” who prepares coffee for the group to try to rouse them out of their drunken stupor. Angela is brash and assertive in her insistence on taking Billy to bed;
Billy rejects this advance because he “can’t see Sallie’s eyes...she must be watching us” (*TCW* 68).

To the surface reader, this may be construed as yet another instance of a male author pitting two strong women against each other as adversaries vying for a man’s affections. However, it really speaks to the changing dynamics of the woman’s role, in this case in Billy’s life, but also in society in general. Sallie is the archetypal caretaker who, though competent and perhaps content, is “caged” (Emmerson 19) and watching from the inside as Billy, and time, move on. Angela, meanwhile, is an independent (business?) woman, free to make her own decisions and control her sexuality, as she does when she overpowers and gets the best of Billy later that night. And Billy, usually understood as the cocksure gunslinger, is caught in this vulnerable position between these two forces. He is attracted to both of these women despite, or maybe even because of, their power over him. And that Sallie is often portrayed as the more demure, “angelic” character is ironic, because in this instance, she is the one who seems to have the most control over the situation. Here, again, is Emmerson’s “blurring” of boundaries that seem so well-constructed at first. Perhaps she and Billy recognize this thrill ride will not last, and he needs someone like Angela, who is not as concerned with pretenses.

One may claim that the drawback to the argument that Angela has control over her sexuality is that she uses it as her primary means of survival. But according to the song about her, “her teeth leave a sting on your very best thing/and its best when she get the best money” (*TCW* 64). She is a willing participant in these transactions and gives as good (or as bad) as she gets. Besides, why is it that a strong woman, who is able to not only take Billy on, but to best him physically and sexually, must be read negatively? The
fear of female sexual empowerment impresses itself on the criticism of Angela’s sexual expression. If anything, Angela is the private complement to Billy’s public bravado. Barbour puts it best when he writes that, “As a representative figure of the sexual frontier woman, she stands for a kind of outlaw freedom from every kind of social repression” (56).

And if there were any doubt as to Sallie’s sexuality being present within *The Collected Works*, Ondaatje makes sure to spell it out in the poem, *Sallie Chisum/Last Words on Billy the Kid 4 a.m.* She describes Billy’s teaching her “how to hold it and how to want it” in reference to a cigarette. Furthermore, she harkens back to the original text in recalling Billy’s removing a splinter from her foot, which in both instances drips with sexual overtones. She is no one’s mother in these descriptions. Also, she uses words, such as “fool” and “stupid,” to describe Billy, which shows she not only does not condone his actions, but that perhaps she is a voice for Ondaatje’s criticism of those who would label Billy a hero. And there is one-upmanship in her saying she had “been alive 37 years since I knew him.” She, like the other women in *The Collected Works*, lived to tell not only his, but her tale as well.

**Conclusion**

Overall, the women in *The Collected Works* deserve more credit than most critics are prepared to give. In choosing to apply a feminist, sexist, or any “-ist” reading to this book, they succumb to Ondaatje’s trap. The starting point for any argument regarding this book should be that nothing in it can or should be taken at face value. Ondaatje knows that the audience wants to participate and willingly go down the path on which he leads. Therein lies the rub: though we hold lofty ideals of ourselves as unbiased interpreters of
the story, as readers and human beings, we want to compartmentalize and condense to create a convenient summary of events. Therefore, black/white, good/bad, and Madonna/whore instantly spring to mind in trying to make sense of Ondaatje’s “reimagining.” That is not to say that these are not also correct readings, but they are not the only way.

Again, the reader must recognize that Ondaatje’s form itself, an amalgam of photos, newspaper articles, interviews, etc., cannot be categorized. This is the shaky platform on which he stands to profess an even shakier version of history. By accepting this as the one and only truth in the whole work, it becomes clear that any interpretation is, theoretically, valid. This is the challenge Ondaatje lays out in The Collected Works, and should we accept, we too, will have bested the myth of Billy the Kid.
Works Cited


