

## Distorted Reality: The Devaluation of Pocahontas

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English 351  
Spring 2014

"No! If you kill him you'll have to kill me too," Pocahontas cries as she shields John Smith from a death blow (Gabriel & Goldberg *Pocahontas*). Her father replies, "Daughter, stand back," to which she insists, "I won't! I love him, Father" (Gabriel & Goldberg, *Pocahontas*). What young, easily impressionable girl would not be struck by filial defiance for the sake of the true love? Perhaps some find such a story trite or unexciting but I, like other girls, was misguided enough to believe an over-romanticized story based on, at best, conjecture, or, at worst, outright lies. The movie industry has repeatedly taken the historic figure of Pocahontas, an incredible woman of whom we know very little, and has turned her into a young, Native American star-crossed lover of John Smith. Camilla Townsend aptly states in *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*: "Myths can lend meaning to our days, and they can inspire wonderful movies. They are also deadly to our understanding. They diminish the influence of facts, and a historical figure's ability to make us think; they diminish our ability to see with fresh eyes" (ix-x). *The New World*, *Pocahontas*, and *Pocahontas II* use the historical Pocahontas to portray a romantic vision and, although they try to portray her in a positive light, they ultimately strip her of her dignity, power, and true value.

Captain John Smith (1580-1631), the famous English traveler who was among the first colonists to settle in the New World's Jamestown colony, may have started the controversy about Pocahontas when he wrote about her rescuing him from death at Powhatan's court (Winans 315-316). In his book *The Generall [sic] Historie [sic] of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*, Smith relates that after a feast and a "long consultation," his head was forcefully put against two stones, and when the Indians were about to "beate [sic] out his brains":

Pocahontas, the Kings dearest daughter, when no intreaty [sic] could prevaile [sic], got his head in her armes [sic], and laid her owne [sic] upon his to save him from death: whereat the Emperour [sic] was contented he should live to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and occupations as themselves (Smith, *General Historie [sic]* 317-318). How romantic! In a ceremony two days later, Powhatan adopted Smith as a son, naming him *Nantaquoud*. (Winans 318)

What is fact and what is myth? Who is the mysterious Pocahontas? One way to put it is: "She was the first

Indian to be baptized, the first to marry a white man, among the first Americans to visit London and the very first to be buried in European soil" (Howe & Bensimhon). "Pocahontas" means "little wanton" or, in modern language, "little mischievous one" (Rountree 16). She also had the names Matoaka and Amonute (Rountree 15). She was born around 1595 to 1596 (Rountree 15). She died in 1617 at the age of 21, before their ship could leave England on the return voyage (Rountree 25; Price 183-184). Another source claims she died at age 22 (Rasmussen & Tilton). Helen Rountree notes: "In her own lifetime, Pocahontas was not particularly important. In fact, very few Virginia records dating from her lifetime even mentioned her. No writer left us with more than little snippets about her . . ." (14). And what we do know about her, or other Indian women, was written by men: "European men largely controlled the historical record, and they were interested in trade, war, and land acquisition rather than in women's roles" (Perdue 4, Introduction). This opinion is backed by another source: ". . . she is visible only in the comments left by the white men who knew her and wrote down their impressions. What we glean comes from reading between the lines" (Townsend 71-72).

Smith's famous story was written when few were alive to contradict its accuracy (Rountree 14). Since 1860, the truth of the account has been disputed (Lemay 2). Rountree highlights the inaccuracy of the punishment Smith anticipated receiving and states his life probably was not in danger, hence ". . . Pocahontas probably did not save Smith's life . . ." (18). This opinion is backed by Townsend, who relates that Smith's writings often had beautiful women saving him and that travel narratives contained some fictionalized events, thus according to cultural standards, ". . . the sequence of events in Smith's story is implausible" (54-55). Rasmussen and Tilton state, "Until proven otherwise, Pocahontas should probably be awarded credit for saving Smith, if only from a test of his composure under duress" (Rasmussen & Tilton). Both Disney's *Pocahontas* and New Line Cinema's *The New World* portray her rescue of Smith. Whether or not this incident is true, it has been blown out of proportion and expanded to include a great love affair that probably did not exist.

In Disney's *Pocahontas*, she is a mature young woman, not a young girl. Historically, she was about ten years old when Smith was captured (Townsend 52). Although the movie romanticizes her saving of him, it at the same time empowers her. Pocahontas states, "This is where the path of hatred has brought us," since the movie dramatically and inaccurately places Smith's attempted execution at the climax, with English and Indian forces ready for full-scale warfare (Gabriel & Goldberg *Pocahontas*). Powhatan is moved and says "My daughter speaks with a wisdom beyond her years," and continues, "We have all come here with anger in our hearts. But she comes here with courage and understanding. From this day forward, if there is to be more killing, it will not start

with me" (Gabriel & Goldberg, *Pocahontas*). Hence, she is shown to be so powerful as to influence all but the "bad guy" (Ratcliffe) to stop fighting.

New Line Cinema's *The New World* uses the same incident as a springboard to divest Pocahontas of her independence. She is also portrayed as a young teenager. Smith narrates, "At the moment I was to die she threw herself upon me" (Malick, *The New World*). Powhatan then decides, "He can teach her about his land across the waves," which puts her in a learning role and sets up the interaction that leads to them falling in love (Malick, *The New World*). They start a romance because the movie wrongly has Smith stay with the Indians for a substantial amount of time after the incident and seemingly "going native," gaining immense appreciation for the Indian culture. In the movie, Smith seemingly idolizes Pocahontas, noting her beauty was such "that the sun himself, though he saw her often, was surprised whenever she came out into his presence" (Malick, *The New World*). He also thinks: "She exceeded the rest not only in feature and proportion, but in wit and spirit too. All loved her" (Malick, *The New World*). Powhatan sees the danger of a love affair, for he warns his daughter: "Promise me – you will put your people before all else," in which she replies, "I know myself," while Powhatan continues, "Even before your own heart. He is not one of us" (Malick, *The New World*).

Along the romance vein, *The New World* has camera angles of Pocahontas and John Smith hesitatingly and longingly touching, caressing, lying down, nuzzling, and kissing. The movie has Pocahontas question herself, "Afraid of myself. A god, he seems to me. What else is life but being near you? Do they suspect? Oh, to be given to you, you to me. I will be faithful to you. True. Two no more. One. One. I am. I am" (Malick, *The New World*). Hence, she becomes a young girl hopelessly in love and more disturbingly idolizing a European man, which could arguably be considered part of the Self and Other dialectic noted by Beauvoir between men, "the Absolute" and "the Subject," and women, "the Other" (Easthope and McGowan 52). Having Pocahontas consider Smith as a god is unjust, since Townsend claims, "At no point did Powhatan, Pocahontas, or any of their people look on the strangers with wide-mouthed awe or consider them gods" (63). If the movie were accurate, this romantic interlude and period of "going native" would be omitted, considering Smith returned home a few days after his near-death experience (Price 58).

Another way in which movies portray Pocahontas inaccurately is through the presence and absence of Kocoum (Kuocum). William Strachey noted in 1612 (three years after Smith left) that she was married to Kocoum, a "private Captayne" for a couple of years (Rountree 20), and she would have been 12 or 13 at that time (Townsend 85). Paula Gunn Allen, however, claims it is "likely" that she married Kuocum and had one child with him (218). It is also unknown if they

divorced or he died (Townsend 87). His character is completely absent from *The New World*. In the movie, Smith stays with Pocahontas for too long, and love-struck John Rolfe comes in after Smith leaves. Before Pocahontas falls in love with Smith, there is a young man with whom she seems playful and affectionate, and she is upset when he is killed in a battle against the white men. However, their exact relationship is not clear. In Disney's *Pocahontas*, Kocoum is inaccurately portrayed as Pocahontas' intended husband, and as a jealous lover set on protecting her from the white men. When Kocoum attacks Smith, Pocahontas tries to stop the fighting; however a young colonist named Thomas fatally shoots Kocoum, leading to Smith's imprisonment. Powhatan reprimands Pocahontas, "Because of your foolishness, Kocoum is dead" (Gabriel & Goldberg, *Pocahontas*). Not only are both movies historically inaccurate, but they both take away a coming-of-age event in Pocahontas' life and deny her the power of making choices. She was no longer a girl once the historical Pocahontas married: "The significance of Pocahontas's status as a married woman is that it was a prerequisite for her taking a full adult role in the *tsenacommah*" (Allen 218-219). She most likely chose to marry Kocoum because she was free to choose her own husband (Townsend 86). As a "young married woman," Pocahontas would have been able to choose to have long hair or short hair and probably had tattoos on her arms or legs (Townsend 88).

In *The New World*, Pocahontas is entrapped by a hopeless passion that probably didn't exist. After she is kidnapped, Smith says, "They said they were going to fetch you. I was against it! I didn't want to hurt you. And now there's disaster all around us. We should have stopped before it was too late" (Malick, *The New World*). Not long after, Pocahontas again falls into breathless love, as she narrates: "What is right? Give? Wrong? Who is this man? Now all is perfect. Let me be lost. True. You flow through me. Like a river. Come. Follow me" (Malick, *The New World*). She even tells Smith, "You have no evil. I belong to you" (Malick, *The New World*).

Disney's *Pocahontas* also forces her to be dependent on love when she is portrayed as telling John Smith, "I can't leave you" (Gabriel & Goldberg, *Pocahontas*). Yet, Pocahontas empowers her at the end by having her end the love affair with Smith after he's inaccurately injured saving Powhatan's life (Gabriel & Goldberg, *Pocahontas*). Wounded and bound for England, Disney's Smith asks Pocahontas to come with him and Powhatan tells her, "You must choose your own path" (Gabriel & Goldberg, *Pocahontas*). She finds she is needed and she chooses to stay behind, telling Smith he needs to go back when he tries to say he will stay with her (Gabriel & Goldberg, *Pocahontas*). She tells him, "No matter what happens, I'll always be with you, forever" and sings the line, "And I'm so grateful to you" (Gabriel & Goldberg, *Pocahontas*). She says goodbye to Smith, kisses him, and runs to watch the ship leave (Gabriel & Goldberg, *Pocahontas*). In reality, Smith left

without saying goodbye after being terribly burned in a gunpowder accident (Rountree 20). While inaccurate, Disney at least leaves her an independent woman instead of a star-crossed lover powerless in the wake of passion.

In *The New World*, Smith also leaves, and gives instructions to others to tell Pocahontas he is dead after he has been gone two months (Malick). Pocahontas is severely grief-stricken when she hears of Smith's death (Malick, *The New World*). John Rolfe says that she was considered "finished, broken, lost" (Malick, *The New World*). It is only through Rolfe that she is eventually redeemed. She agrees to marry him even though it is clear she is not madly in love with him and she does not make a free choice. Take, for example, this passage from the proposal scene, (after she has been given the Christian name Rebecca):

Rolfe: Why do you shrink from me? Won't you say yes?  
 Pocahontas: If you'd like.  
 Rolfe: This isn't what I expected, Rebecca.  
 Pocahontas: Sorry.  
 Rolfe: Why are you crying?  
 Pocahontas: I suppose . . . I must be happy.  
 Rolfe: You do not love me now. Someday you will. (Malick, *The New World*)

She wonders, "Mother, why can I not feel as I should? Must? Once false, I must not be again. Take out the thorn"(Malick, *The New World*). They fall in love. She thinks, "He is like a tree. He shelters me. I lie in his shade. Can I ignore my heart? What is from you, and what is not?" (Malick *The New World*). Here again, Pocahontas relies on a man for strength. When she finds out Smith is alive, she tells Rolfe she is actually married to Smith, to which he replies, "Married? You don't know the meaning of the word, exactly" (Malick, *The New World*).

In reality, she did choose to get married and baptized: "It is clear that Pocahontas was doing, at least to some extent, what she wanted to do" (Townsend 119). One of the reasons affecting her choice could have been for an alliance with the English (Townsend 119), as there was warfare between the colonists and Native Americans (Rountree 19). Pocahontas was kidnapped in 1613 (Price 148). When kidnapped, she was about seventeen or eighteen and was a hostage for twelve months, and naturally had to adapt to colonial life (Rountree 22). She was eventually taken from Jamestown to Henricus (Price 152). She was baptized in 1614 and took the name Rebecca (Rountree 23). She and Rolfe fell in love and married in 1614 (Rountree 22-23). Her marriage with Rolfe brought a period of peace from warfare ("April 5, 1614"). Or another source says, "Pocahontas's marriage symbolized the truce that ushered in this hopeful period, but it did not cause it" (Rountree 24). Peace of Pocahontas lasted five more years after her death (Allen

304).

The movies leave out how the ten-year-old Pocahontas was sent by Powhatan to "secure" the release of some Indian prisoners at Jamestown, at which point Smith wrote she was "the only Nonpariel [sic] of his [Powhatan's] Country" (qtd. in Townsend 69). She sometimes brought food on behalf of her father to starving Jamestown Residents ("April 5, 1614"), which made her valuable: "With her growing language skills, she became ever more powerful—more welcome at the fort, and more important to her father" (Townsend 71). Smith claimed that Pocahontas warned him of a plot against their lives, but Townsend says it isn't very likely: ". . . it is unlikely not only that Pocahontas fled through the night to warn her English friends but also that Powhatan seriously intended to kill Smith at this point" (Townsend 80). Whether true or not, these instances at least show her as more than a beautiful woman.

While *Pocahontas* portrays the Indians as intelligent and displays the tension, racism, and infringement of land, they faced *Pocahontas II* trivializes Indians and Pocahontas' accomplishments in England by presenting frivolous characters and events. The movie is extremely historically inaccurate, only the most pertinent instances relevant to the essay will be related. Although it doesn't excuse this movie's erroneous portrayal, Disney at least included a disclaimer in the credits that the movie is "a fictionalized account of Pocahontas' life in England" and gave directions how to "learn about her remarkable, true life story" [Raymond & Ellery, *Pocahontas II*]. In *Pocahontas II* she is amazed by London, runs all over dressed in indigenous clothing, and even climbs a tree to get a better view of the city (Raymond & Ellery, *Pocahontas II*). A woman hits her husband and says, "You mustn't stare, she's barely dressed" (Raymond & Ellery, *Pocahontas II*). In the movie, she charms the king and is successful at court until she stands up for animal rights by protesting the cruelty of bear-baiting and is subsequently arrested (Raymond & Ellery, *Pocahontas II*). After being rescued, Pocahontas returns to the King and with powerful words, ends up convincing him to stop a fictional war armada that was going to go to the New World, piloted by the first film's villain (Ratcliffe) (Raymond & Ellery, *Pocahontas II*). Then, she and Rolfe sail to the New World, presumably happily ever after, since they are in love and children cannot see their favorite T.V. character fail (Raymond & Ellery, *Pocahontas II*).

As previously mentioned, Pocahontas went to England as a wife and mother of one son. She was taken to England in hopes that by "parading her before royalty, clergy, and merchants, [she'd] attract even more money and colonists to Virginia" (Allen 281-282). Allen also notes: "Lady Rebecca had a good command of English, dressed attractively, comported herself with quiet dignity, and danced gracefully" (283). This image is clearly contradictory to the one Disney portrays. In London she showed "dignity and aplomb" (Rountree

25). She was an important poster girl: "Pocahontas, the converted daughter of a chief, was impressive evidence of the attractiveness of Virginia as an investment and of the founding's success as a missionary endeavor" (Rasmussen & Tilton).

Pocahontas is also denied credit for the historically powerful reprimand she gives Smith for failing in his duties to her father and her people. In *The New World*, her reunion with Smith in London is more like the meeting of two former lovers who can be friends and go their separate paths. Smith shows admiration for her: "'Her Ladyship'—who would have guessed it?" (Malick, *New World*). He asks her during the conversation, "You knew I had promise, didn't you?" to which she replies yes, and then expresses her belief he will find the Indies (Malick, *New World*). Subsequently he says, "I thought it was a dream, what we knew in the forest. It's the only truth" (Malick, *New World*). He declares before leaving, "It seems to me as if I were speaking to you for the first time" (Malick, *New World*). *Pocahontas II* also omits her reprimand, since at the end of the movie she has to choose between two men, whether to be with Smith or Rolfe (Raymond & Ellery, *Pocahontas II*). In reality, John Smith writes that she told him:

You did promise Powhatan what was yours should bee [*sic*] his, and he the like you; you called him father being in his land a stranger, and by the same reason so must I doe [*sic*] you... Were you not afraid to come into my fathers Countrie [*sic*], and caused feare [*sic*] in him and all his people (but mee [*sic*]) and feare [*sic*] you here I shall call you father; I tell you then I will, and you shall call mee [*sic*] childe, and so I will bee [*sic*] for ever and ever your Contrieman [*sic*]. They did tell us always you were dead and I knew no other till I came to Plimoth [*sic*]; yet Powhatan did command Uttamatomakkin to seeke [*sic*] you, and know the truth, because your Countrymen [*sic*] will lie much ("Government," 442).

This is a powerful speech left out of the movies. Historically, she was: "...clearly upbraiding Smith for dereliction of duty, for dealing dishonorably with Powhatan, the Great King and his father, to whom he had sworn loyalty. She is aware of the many instances of his duplicity, and rightly confronts him with her knowledge and her shame that he could act so" (Allen 293).

Without a lot of historical documentation, it is hard to know the real Pocahontas, especially when movies take away what little power she has. The late modern Native American author Paula Gunn Allen relates some seemingly fantastic yet empowering theories about Pocahontas in her book *Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat*. While a bit confusing and complex, we can glean a powerful and independent

image of Pocahontas. Allen says of Pocahontas in her books "Dedication," "She was the first boarding school Indian, and the first to walk two paths in a balanced manner" (v). She argues that Pocahontas is not someone who came into history by "falling in love" (Allen 11). Pocahontas is imbued with power: "She was much more than a simple Indian maiden: she was an initiate and powerful practitioner of the Dream-Vision People, a shaman-priestess in modern terms" (Allen 136). She reveals that Pocahontas' name, Amonute, makes her "a Beloved Woman, shaman-priestess, sorcerer, adept of high degree" (Allen 18). For Allen, Pocahontas is the one who saves Smith: "As the Beloved Woman who possess the *powa*, deciding who would live and who would die, it was Pocahontas, not the priests or warriors or even Powhatan, the shaman-emperor, *mamanantowick*, who determined the fate of the tribe, reflecting the significant power women held in numerous Native American nations . . ." (Allen 50-51). Allen also reveals her as a "sacred spy and ceremonially empowered diplomat" (112). She believes Pocahontas was either "abducted" or else "colluded" or "orchestrated" her kidnapping (Allen 180). Rather than being a victim of her conversion and marriage, she planned "to gain the *manit powa* of the English and transfer it to her Powhatan medicine women and men" (Allen 145). In this portrayal, her marriage to John Rolfe was advantageous: "The tobacco produced from the union of the Powhatan and the English, medicine woman and alchemist, soon became the dominant variety distributed to a global market" (Allen 202). After marriage, she could "plant and harvest information" more and easily be an "intelligence agent." Allen even discusses the idea that Pocahontas was poisoned to death in England, an idea supported by Professor of Native American Studies Jack D. Forbes due to all the information she would have shared with the Powhatan Indians about the monarchy (Allen 298). In addition, Allen talks of a conspiracy idea, in which even Rolfe might be a suspect (299).

While Allen's facts can be questionable (in the book, she states opinions, makes guesses, or has claims appended to "I think" [Allen 118]), Allen also claims that the group that accompanied her to England-Uttamatamakin (who was a "council representative"), her half-sister, three servant Powhatan women, and four Powhatan men--was a "party of spies" who were "all highly skilled shamans, *quioccaska* and/or medicine people (i.e., priests and priestesses)" (Allen 272-273). Townsend supports a similar idea since she writes that Pocahontas and "several of her family members" went to England "as free agents intent on gathering information that might clarify" the tribe's "future course" (Townsend x). She writes, "This was a fact-finding mission more than a pleasure trip" (Townsend 137).

Pocahontas has so many dimensions since her death that it is possible for one to write a book about the injustice done to her image, whether it is as simple as a

stanza from the innocuous song Peggy Lee song "Fever" or as serious as when Neil Young sang: "I wish I was a trapper/ I would give a thousand pelts/ To sleep with Pocahontas/ And find out how she felt" (Price 4-5; qtd. in Howe & Bensimhon). As Rasmussen and Tilton write, "During the centuries since its creation... the Pocahontas narrative has so often been retold and embellished and so frequently adapted to contemporary issues that the actual, flesh-and-blood woman has become almost totally obscured by the burgeoning mythology. ("Pocahontas") From what little we learned from the various sources, it is clear that Pocahontas has value, dignity, and power, but this is often watered-down or lost when she is portrayed as a star-crossed lover or girl in need of a man to feel fulfilled. As a final thought, and an issue worthy of more exploration, this essay closes with a quote by Helen C. Rountree:

The story of a young woman firmly rooted in her own culture, held hostage by bellicose newcomers, forcibly and then willingly assimilated into their culture, killed by a mysterious disease, buried far from her homeland, and ultimately used by the dominant society as a symbol for the oppression of her own people is not only an authentic account of Pocahontas's experiences but is also emblematic of the histories of generations of native people. (27)

## Glossary

**Powa:** "a kind of energy and paranormal ability that enables one to foresee events, heal the sick, human, animal, or plant (one, two or all, depending); teleport objects; locate lost people or objects; soul-walk; shape-shift; compel others, human or otherwise; produce healthy and plentiful crops; connect with the mystery, the manito aki, and various manito" (Allen 335).

**Mamanantowick:** "combination priest-prophet-medicine-person-shaman; great leader with these qualities" (Allen 334).

**Manito aki:** "the world or land of the spirits; implicit order" (Allen 334).

**Tsenacommakah:** "the communal lands and being, of the Powhatan people" (Allen 3).

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