The Woman, the Myth, the Legend: Tracing Pocahontas Through History

Pocahontas's image can be seen in many places: hanging in the rotunda of the United States Capitol building in Washington, mounted as a figurehead on the stern of a ship, or as a cartoon singing on a child's television. Made known primarily through Jamestown colonist John Smith's account of his "rescue" by her hand, Pocahontas has become one of the most recognizable historical figures to date. Though their story is one with which most everyone is familiar, the image of Pocahontas has been constantly remodeled, shrouding the Powhatan princess in a cloud of mystery. The images build upon past portrayals of the young Indian, playing into societal standards to appeal to audiences and make the foreign woman relatable. Today, artists continue to transcribe the image of Pocahontas or the scene of Smith's to fit common artistic norms. Knowing this fact, a question arises: why is Pocahontas's image continually revamped, recreated, and reintroduced? Using the accounts of the Powhatan girl's actions to bolster his colonist propaganda, Smith opened the door for future generations to exploit Pocahontas in a similar way. For the most part, the molestation of Pocahontas's image from the 17th to the 20th century has been employed to perpetuate and promote the positive gains and glories of colonization.

After John Smith's initial account, Pocahontas's story was dissected and recreated almost as quickly as it was introduced. In a written catalogue of their artistic exhibit, "Pocahontas: Her Life and Legend," co-curators William M.S. Rasmussen and Robert S. Tilton of the Virginia Historical Society state that "The fame of Pocahontas began in her own lifetime. Contemporary Londoners welcomed with excitement a figure who was living proof that American natives could be Christianized and civilized" (7). In his *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* (1624), Smith briefly mentions Pocahontas's actions that prevented his

gruesome death; in his earlier writings on the colonization of Virginia—specifically *A True Relation of Such Occurrences and Accidents of Note as Happened in Virginia* (1608)—this notable event is omitted. It is within this discrepancy that reservation surrounding the story and its intended effect is rooted, putting Smith's validity and reliability under question. Since John Smith had a white, European audience in mind, it is clear that his objectives for his writings on colonization could skew and alter the truth in a way that best portrays the colonization efforts in America. Ater he left Jamestown, Smith began writing about his experiences in the colonies, and "Much of Smith's writing, beginning with his first work, *A True Relation of…Virginia* (1608), served the dual purpose of promoting colonization and establishing Smith's own reputation as exemplary colonizer" (Winans 275). Most Europeans at the time were concerned with colonization only if it yielded profit, be it literal economic profit in the form of gold or religious "profit" in the form of convertible souls. Smith's description of Pocahontas's desire to save him from death, for example, might be a fictional story through which he characterizes Indians as submissive people willing to yield to the "superior" race. Smith gives little elaboration of Pocahontas's selfless action:

> Then as many as could layd hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid
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> his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beate out his braines, Pocahontas the
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> Kings dearest daughter as he lay on a rock awaiting death, *Pocahontas* the Kings
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> dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and
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> laid her own upon his to save him from death. (276)

With a similar lack of emotional description, Smith states how Pocahontas comes to warn the colonists to flee the area when her father, Powhatan, was planning to kill them—making sure to note that Pocahontas could have been killed for such actions (281). Smith is presumably

distorting Pocahontas's acts of aid into acts of infatuation that were meant to reflect Indian sentiment as a whole. Smith's emphasis that Pocahontas was so eager to help him and his men "depicts the paradigm that appears throughout many later colonist writings, in which Native Americans readily submit to the advance of a European civilization they accept as superior to their own" (Winans 275). Smith creates a stepping stone for others to fashion romanticized portrayals of Pocahontas and her role for Europeans and colonists.

Images from the 17th accurately depicted Smith's rescue story, being sure to include truthful details included in Smith's account. For example, *The Capture, Evaluation, and Rescue of John Smith*, engraved just 26 years later in 1634, keeps the integrity of Smith's original story; the image shows Smith being taken hostage, Pocahontas laying her head upon Smith's to stop the murder, and an exotic ritual done by Indian priests to assess Smith's threat (Rasmussen 13). In each "scene," the picture matches Smith's words accurately. As time went on, however, representations strayed farther from fact, with artists relying more heavily on past renderings than on Smith's original descriptions (14).

In future works, accuracy was less important than emotional appeal, but the glory colonization endured as a main goal. In the nineteenth century, artists committed "the greatest dissemination of the Pocahontas legend. This was the period in which the brief history of American came to be recognized as containing the types of elements that could be used in the construction of romantic visual and literary narratives" (7). In John Gadsby Chapman's *Pocahontas Saving the Life of Captain John Smith* in 1836, the scene becomes more romanticized and dramatic. In Capellano's portrayal, a dark room is filled with smoke from a central fire, with Smith awaiting his death and Pocahontas standing over him in protection. According to Rasmussen and Tilton, "Chapman silhouettes Pocahontas against a cloud of white

smoke and bathes her in light. The smoke and light seem to sanctify her" (15). Pocahontas acts

as a savior to Smith, but also prevents the Indian tribe from their savage act. Pocahontas is a

vision of light juxtaposed against the dark and violent scene in which she is involved (Simms

119-20). It is in this image that the 19th century's idealistic traits clearly surface. In 1841,

Thomas Sinclair built upon Chapman's romantic image, then furthered it. In Sinclair's

lithograph, *Captain Smith Rescued by Pocahontas*, Pocahontas is depicted as a beautiful

Caucasian-looking female, gently looking up to her fellow tribesman as she begs for Smith's

sake. Smith, too, is good-looking, and the pair is depicted as a romantically involved couple. A

tribesman stares in awe at the scene before him, unable to comprehend Pocahontas's sacrifice for

the colonist. Says Rasmussen, "Sinclair may have believed that his rendering of this attractive

pair…would find admirers among…the large, often female, readership of sentimental fiction in

America" (15). In clear cases of artistic flexibility, Capellano and Sinclair appealed to the

popular Romantic Movement, gaining viewers and urging them to see the message behind

Pocahontas's risking her life for a white man. Her sacrifice meant colonist victory, and pieces

that appeased viewers at the time would most effectively reach masses as propaganda.

 Charles Inger's *Smith Rescued by Pocahontas* is perhaps the artistic rendition farthest

from Smith's original account. The 1870 lithograph shows an Indian yielding a large metal

weapon, clearly not accessible to the Powhatan's of the time. Also, Inger includes generic Indian

"staples," such as teepees and ornate headdresses not common in Powhatan culture.

Additionally, Pocahontas is portrayed as overtly sensual, and very little of the scene matches

Smith's description. This lithograph was a nod to the "process that was beginning to make

Plains Indians the models for all native cultures" (Rasmussen 16). In Victor Nehlig's 1874

Pocahontas Saving John Smith, a similar dilemma is found. Historical accuracy is disregarded,

with Plains Indians playing the roles of the Powhatan tribe punishing Smith. Nehlig "employs the artistic devices used by baroque painters of the Counter Reformation to maximize the emotional effect of scenes of martyrdom" (Rasmussen 17). Inger and Nehlig's works both lack historical accuracy, and yet they are still able to depict Smith's initial message of native submission and compliance. Even straying from earlier artists' detailed depictions and becoming more generic, the artists convey to viewers the ease with which Native Americans can be "won over" by colonists.

Perhaps more notable than the movement away from Smith's account are the modifications of Pocahontas's image over past centuries. Simon van de Passe's *Pocahontas*, published in 1616 in John Smith's *Generall Historie* in 1624, was until recently considered the most accurate portrait of Pocahontas—albeit in extravagant European attire—because it is based wholly on Smith's accounts and takes little liberties with description. The portrait shows Pocahontas—though here she is "Rebecca"—in a high and rigid collar, ornately adorned clothes, a tall hat, and with an ostrich feather, a symbol of royalty. Though the picture accurately illustrates Pocahontas's presumed skin color and features, "It gave the chaste image the Virginia Company no doubt wanted to project" (Rasmussen 32). An innocent, uncorrupted portrait of the native-turned-European served as proof of a triumph for the Company, painting its colonization efforts in a positive light. Van de Passe did not attempt to hide Pocahontas's dark skin or manly features, but "It is his truthfulness that apparently incited later efforts to correct the perhaps overly honest attempt by Van de Passe to capture an actual appearance" (32). These "efforts" refer to those of future English artists to paint Pocahontas as more feminine, more European. In one 1793 work, an engraving called *Pocahontas* by an unknown English artist, Pocahontas's European clothes remain virtually unchanged, but her face is made to look more

like that of an Englishwoman. The change is subtle, but effective; her nose is reduced, her brows less defined, and her smile a bit more pronounced. Though she appears only slightly different, "to eighteenth-century eyes, this less 'native' Pocahontas perhaps came closer to achieving the beauty that would have been expected of the 'Indian princess' of legend" (32). More drastic is the later portrait by an unknown artist, also named *Pocahontas* but referred to as the Booton Hall portrait. In this painting, van de Passe's original depiction of Pocahontas has been completely disregarded. The figure in the Booton Hall portrait looks almost fully Caucasian, with pale skin, brown hair in place of black, and rouge on her lips. In this radically incorrect version of van de Passe's original work, Pocahontas has been fully absorbed into European culture and completely disconnected from her native roots. This absorption stands as yet another boast of colonization's victories; "Rebecca" personifies the erased natives, and more importantly represents the beautiful fruits of colonization.

While many changes have been applied to his work, perhaps van de Passe's original engraving would have been better left untouched. Never attempting to "make her beautiful in a sense that would have appalled to English eyes," the engraving shows more effectively the success of European influence—this clearly savage individual has been transformed into a woman of royalty and class. This is in all probability the view of Mary Ellen Howe, who in 1994 reconstructed van de Passe's image of *Pocahontas* once more. Her Pocahontas was a painting over a photograph of van de Passe's engraving, and it is considered to be the most accurate portrait of Pocahontas today. Her skin is a gold brown, her hair is painted a deep black, and her face is void of makeup or a smile. She appears rigid and uncomfortable in her foreign garments, staring blankly ahead. The gradual digression from van de Passe's original engraving serves as a digression from the truth—a theme common in Pocahontas's portrayals. However,

such deviation should be noted as important, for it shows European desire to see Pocahontas as one of them. Rather than accept *Pocahontas* as van de Passe viewed her, English artists wanted to be sure that Pocahontas's image would appeal to Europeans. If viewers could relate to the newly christened Rebecca Rolfe, then they could see in this woman the advantages of colonization—savagery has been tamed, a soul has been saved, and a foreigner is made a countrywoman. If this was the result of colonization, surely most would support the practice. It is only recently, in 1994, that society is comfortable enough with Pocahontas's true image that Howe painted an accurate portrayal of the Powhatan turned Englishwoman.

Walt Disney Studios' 1994 *Pocahontas* is possibly the most remarkable portrayal of the Powhatan. In the film, she is depicted as a beautiful, slender, large-chested figure, appearing as the ideal 20th century woman. Not only does she save Smith in the film, but they are romantically involved, and Pocahontas is never taken to Europe. According to Rasmussen and Tilton, this joining of 1990's ideas and the legend of Pocahontas are Disney's attempts to "present the Pocahontas story in a new way to a new audience around the world, yet be true to the spirit of her life and legend" (49). Though the goal of the 1994 film is clearly not to motivate colonization of America, its attempts to appeal to the American idea of an ideal woman is significant. In the film, Pocahontas is a beautiful depiction of America's history, personifying our tainted past in a positive light. American colonies were built upon Indian blood, and Pocahontas and John Smith's romantic and loving relationship in the film attempts to appease America, lessening the guilt that our forefathers have passed down to us.   Just as past artists based their portrayals of Pocahontas in current ideology, so too did Disney in its attempts to reach out to an audience. With a character that is easy to relate to, any message is more likely to reach viewers. In past centuries, the goal was to encourage colonization, and so Pocahontas

stood as a recurrent symbol for such an idea; in the film, the goal is more so a colonization of the past, a call to identify with and take pride in history. In order to reach their audience, artists would give their viewers a Pocahontas that they wanted to listen to.

Pocahontas is an intriguing character of American, even world, history. The truth of her story will perhaps never be discovered, and yet she is a modern celebrity with whom America continues to relate. Centuries have erased and rewritten her story, and "In many ways, this woman, about whom so very little is actually known…is a complete product of the American imagination" (Gallagher 1). Though much truth is not known about Pocahontas and her life, it is clear that artists will continue to try to solve the mystery. With continued attempts to recreate the Powhatan princess, artists are able to use her virtually universal recognition to enhance arguments and persuade others. In looking at images since Smith's *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles*, Pocahontas is clearly a tool of propaganda for colonization.

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