

Native in a New World

The Trans-Atlantic Life of Pocahontas

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Abstract

Historians studying the early contact period typically focus on the interaction of European newcomers with indigenous peoples on the North American continent. However, Europeans were not the only people to travel across the Atlantic, nor were they the only ones to experience the surprise and amazement of seeing a new world. Many Native American people voyaged to Europe, some as captives, some as emissaries for their people, and some as the spouses of Europeans. Pocahontas is the best-known of these trans-Atlantic individuals, and although she left no written record of her own, it is possible to reconstruct some of her experiences as an explorer of Europe. Despite the efforts of the Jamestown colonists to educate her in English mores, her own people's teachings and customs continued to effect how she saw the foreigners and the strange new world of seventeenth-century London. While attending a Guy Fawkes' Day celebration in England, she may have recalled her own people's use of fire to destroy enemies. Upon meeting King James I at the royal Twelfth Night masque, she perhaps compared his displays of wealth and power to those of her father. As she lay dying of a mysterious European illness, she may have wondered how English medical practices would compare to the healing traditions of the Powhatans. In order to make sense of all that she experienced in England, she drew upon the cultural knowledge of her people. Reconstructing Pocahontas's vision of England not only elucidates the experiences of a Native woman whose thoughts and feelings have been long-lost to time, but it also provides a new way of seeing English society and culture in the early seventeenth-century.

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Introduction

Four centuries ago a small group of Englishmen set out on a voyage across the Atlantic that would forever change the history of North America. The story of these ambitious colonists is well-known to any student of early colonial history. Less well-known, however, is the story of another trans-Atlantic voyage that took place only ten years later. In the cramped quarters of a wooden ship these travelers anxiously awaited arrival in a new world of their own, but their destination was not America but Europe. In 1616, the Powhatan Indian passengers aboard the *Treasurer*, like the Jamestown colonists before them, encountered a land filled with customs, traditions, and practices no less alien to their own experience. One of these passengers was a young, twenty-year-old woman. Her name was Pocahontas.

Historians of the early contact era have typically focused on the interactions of Europeans and Natives on the North American continent. However, Europeans were not the only ones to cross the Atlantic, nor were they the only ones to experience the amazement of seeing a new world. In the cross-currents of the Atlantic world, goods, ideas, and people were exchanged in both directions.¹ Yet, little historic attention has been paid to the Native people who made the daring voyage across the Atlantic and who came face-to-face with the customs and traditions of Europe. Pocahontas, like the Native explorers before and after her, had to make sense of this new world by drawing upon her own experiences and cultural knowledge. Seeing the similarities and differences of English and Powhatan culture from her Native

¹ For a thorough discussion of the exchanges of flora, fauna, and diseases see A.W. Crosby, The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972).

perspective, she created her own interpretations of England in the seventeenth century.

Through a careful examination of Pocahontas's life and Powhatan cultural beliefs, we can gain insight into this Native woman's experiences in England, which in turn leads to a better understanding of the complexities of the early Atlantic world.

ATLANTIC HISTORY

A relatively new and growing field, Atlantic History seeks to examine the cultural connections and interactions of groups bordering the Atlantic Ocean. Traditionally, historians have separated the histories of the various continents of the Atlantic world, focusing their studies on geographically specified topics such as "European," "African" or "American" history. However, Atlantic History recognizes that the continents did not develop in isolation and that following Christopher Columbus's fateful voyage in 1492, Europe, Africa, the Americas, and the Caribbean became intricately intertwined. As two old worlds clashed together, a new world developed and evolved into the world we know today.¹

Atlantic History embraces the people and circumstances of four continents and the Caribbean islands with the goal of understanding the interactions between groups of diverse cultural background, language, beliefs, and social structure.² These groups came into contact in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and each felt the dramatic effects of exchanges in goods, people, disease, beliefs, and ideas. Much of the interaction in the early Atlantic world took place in the Americas. While scholars have moved beyond the narrow stories of how Columbus, De Soto, Champlain, Cartier, and Smith marched into a land they described as the

¹ Bernard Bailyn, Atlantic History: Concept and Contours, (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 4, 55.

² Bailyn, Atlantic History, 61.

“New World,” even the new Atlantic historians tend to retain a decidedly Eurocentric focus. The stories, in other words, flow from where *Europeans* went. The complex encounters and exchanges ramify from a European center. Furthermore, research has emphasized the exchange of biota and its ecological and economic effects on the lives of Europeans. However, Native *people* also played a part in the history of the Atlantic, not only in the Americas but in Europe as well.

TRANS-ATLANTIC NATIVES

Beginning with Christopher Columbus’s first voyage to the Caribbean, Native peoples were shipped back and forth across the ocean as curiosities, captives, slaves, and diplomats. On Columbus’s second voyage, for example, he filled his ship with New World oddities to astonish the Spanish court. These exotic rarities included sparkling gold, colorful parrots, and twenty-six Carib captives from the Lesser Antilles. Many of these Native individuals were later sold as slaves in Seville and lived out the rest of their lives in Spain.¹

Early French explorers also brought Natives back to their homeland, hoping to dazzle the Indians with their displays of European wealth and culture. The sixteenth-century writer, Michel de Montaigne noted that some of these Indians were less amazed than shocked by the inequality of wealth distribution in Renaissance France and also by the French nobility’s willingness to swear loyalty to a child-king.² In the sixteenth century, explorer Jacques Cartier brought Iroquoian boys named Taïnoagny and Domagaia to Brittany to learn French

¹ Samuel M. Wilson, *Hispaniola: Caribbean Chiefdoms in the Age of Columbus*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 78.

² Michel de Montaigne, *Des Cannibales*, translated into modern French by Séverine Auffret, (Barcelona, Spain: Mille et Une Nuits, 2000), 41.

and to serve as translators.¹ He later took the niece of an Iroquoian headman named Donnacona to France, where she remained for the rest of her life, perhaps marrying a Frenchman.² In later centuries, French and English fur traders sometimes sent the children of their Native “wives” to Europe for a Christian education.³ These young children of mixed ancestry left the familiar comforts of their mothers’ home and family to embark on a voyage to the foreign land and culture of their fathers.

As relations between Natives and newcomers grew more formalized over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Native individuals also crossed the Atlantic as diplomats. In the early 1700s, “four Indian kings” visited Queen Anne of England and were greeted with royal treatment. In 1734, a group of Yamacraws led by Tomochichi traveled to London and met with King George III. In elaborate royal ceremonies, these Indians were welcomed and promised lasting friendship with the English.⁴ Other delegations of Cherokees, Illinois, and Missouri Valley Indians also made tours of England and France, viewing European culture first-hand. Like the European explorers before them, these Native individuals saw the sights and sounds of foreign lands and took these observations back to their homelands, using their new knowledge as an aid in their diplomatic relations with Euro-Americans.

For Pocahontas’s people, the Powhatans, her voyage across the Atlantic marked one of the earliest diplomatic missions of Natives to Europe. However, Pocahontas was not the first Powhatan individual to travel to Europe. In 1559 or 1560, a Powhatan boy named

¹ Daniel K. Richter, Facing East from Indian Country: A Native History of Early America, (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 28.

² Richter, Facing East from Indian Country, 30.

³ Sylvia Van Kirk, Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-trade Society, 1670-1870, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983), 5.

⁴ Nancy Shoemaker, A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 35.

Paquinqueneo was taken captive by Spanish explorers in the Carolina Sounds. After spending ten years touring the Caribbean and Spain, this boy, renamed Don Luis by the Spanish, returned to his homeland with a Jesuit mission.¹ Despite his Spanish education and his decade abroad, Don Luis preferred to return to the cultural traditions of his people. He rejected Christianity and even helped to plan and lead a successful attack against the missionaries, destroying any trace of the foreigners. In later years, the paramount chief, Powhatan, sent a young Native boy named Namontack to travel to England with the Jamestown colonists. Sent to learn English, Namontack also served as a spy, reporting to Powhatan what he had seen of the English in London.²

Pocahontas's own 1616 voyage to London was made with an entourage of at least ten Powhatan individuals. Three of these Powhatans were too ill to make the return voyage to Virginia and thus they remained in England after Pocahontas's death. One of these men, renamed Georgius, went to work copying documents for a Londoner named George Thorpe before his untimely death from lung disease two years later. The other two were women, baptized Mary and Elizabeth. After several years in England, these women opted to return to the Americas. Fearing that the women would give up their new Christian faith if they returned to their own people, the English instead sent them to become wives for colonists in Bermuda.³

Native individuals who traveled across the Atlantic had the opportunity to reverse the ethnographic gaze of the colonial period.⁴ As explorers of Europe, they witnessed European culture in its home environment. Did they view the traditions and customs they saw as strange

¹ Helen C. Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough: Three Indian Lives Changed by Jamestown, (Charlottesville, V.A.: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 26.

² Camilla Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2004), 9, 67.

³ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 166-167.

⁴ Shoemaker, A Strange Likeness, 36.

and unfamiliar? Or, did they note similarities between the ways of the Europeans and the traditions of their own people? How did Donnacona's niece adapt to the socially stratified world of sixteenth-century France? What were Mary and Elizabeth's feelings regarding English marital traditions? Was Paquinqueneo impressed by the military might of imperial Spain? These are the questions and problems that inform this thesis. In order to begin uncovering their experiences, I have chosen to look at one person, Pocahontas, perhaps the best-known and the most well-documented of these trans-Atlantic Native individuals.

THE MYTH OF POCAHONTAS

Not only does Pocahontas's voyage to England deserve attention because of the surviving records of the journey, but I also believe her story should be reexamined in light of the myths that surround her life and her interactions with the English. Nearly as soon as she died, Pocahontas's story began the process of mythologization as Englishmen and later Euro-Americans used her as a symbol of their own success in America and as a justification for future exploits. John Smith, one of the early Jamestown colonists, rewrote history to paint Pocahontas as a dramatic exception to her "savage" people, a woman who lovingly embraced English culture and religion. For seventeenth-century Englishmen, Pocahontas's life was deemed a success story that glorified the superiority of English culture and encouraged Englishmen and women to spread their traditions and religion across the American continent.¹

In the nineteenth century, Pocahontas's tale enjoyed renewed popularity as American southerners searched for an origin story that would compete with the famous Pilgrim and Thanksgiving story of the north. Latching on to Pocahontas, Euro-Americans increased the

¹ Rebecca Blevins Faery, Cartographies of Desire: Captivity, Race, and Sex in the Shaping of an American Nation, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 155.

mythology surrounding her life by creating and elaborating a fictionalized romance between the Powhatan girl and John Smith. Choosing to omit her factual marriage to John Rolfe because of their antebellum attitudes towards “miscengenation,” white southerners instead focused on the unconsummated love of Smith and Pocahontas.¹ Smith became the archetype of an American male: strong, brave, independent, self-reliant, and daring. Pocahontas, on the other hand, served as a symbol for the continent itself: she lovingly welcomed the English, especially Smith, and allowed herself to be taken and converted to their beliefs and culture. Through this version of Pocahontas’s story, Euro-Americans further justified their dominance on the continent by implying that their supposedly superior culture was welcomed with open-arms by America’s first inhabitants.²

These popular nineteenth-century versions of Pocahontas’s tale have persisted in modern times. Through films and plays, Pocahontas has been cast and recast as an Indian princess who fell in love with John Smith and embraced English culture. Only in recent years has her story been reexamined to discover the truth behind the myth. However, popular culture still loves the romantic legend. In Terrence Malick’s 2005 film, *The New World*, Pocahontas continues to pine after John Smith and to help the English in their colonial endeavors. Although the film shows Pocahontas’s captivity among the English and her marriage to John Rolfe, it continues to portray her as a girl willing to betray her own people to save the Englishman she loves.³

¹ Faery, *Cartographies of Desire*, 121.

² Helen C. Rountree, “Pocahontas: The Hostage Who Became Famous,” *Sifters: Native American Women’s Lives*, edited by Theda Perdue, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp.14-28.

³ The myth of Pocahontas is also immortalized in the Capitol Rotunda’s 1840 oil painting “Baptism of Pocahontas” by John Gadsby Chapman.

In this thesis, I argue that an understanding of Pocahontas on her own terms is critically important for a number of reasons. First, a careful examination of her experiences contributes to the field of Atlantic history by expanding our knowledge of the complexities of the relationships between Natives and newcomers in the early colonial world. Second, through studying a Native woman, we learn about the role of gender in the early modern world and about how sexuality became a factor in plays of politics and power, in alliance-building, and in the formation of early national and ethnic identities. Finally, this research contributes to the field of ethnohistory by expanding our understanding of seventeenth-century Powhatan culture and by showing that emotions and feelings of historic individuals also matter in the study of their lives and interactions with others. During her voyage to London, Pocahontas witnessed and participated in numerous English cultural traditions. Documenting her experiences is important, but perhaps even more significant is delving into the emotions she would have felt as she came into contact with these foreign practices. Despite her time living among the English in Virginia, Pocahontas maintained a distinct Powhatan worldview. As a Powhatan woman, she would have made unique interpretations of the new world of England and by recreating her experience we can gain insight into the thoughts and feelings of this Native woman. Through her eyes, we can see seventeenth-century England as would an outsider. Which customs seemed familiar? Which traditions appeared shocking?¹

¹ My research also contributes to the growing scholarship on Native women. For a deeper discussion of the challenges and rewards of documenting the lives and experiences of Native women, see the edited volumes of Theda Perdue, *Sifters: Native American Women's Lives*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and Nancy Shoemaker, *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native American Women*, (New York: Routledge, 1995) and the essay of Natalie Zemon Davis, "Iroquois Women, European Women," in *Women, "Race," and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (New York: Routledge, 1994), 243-258.

SOURCES OF KNOWLEDGE

There are several problems confronting scholars who seek to reconstruct the seemingly unknowable dimensions of experience. Pocahontas did not leave the written records prized by historians today. Her people had their own ways of commemorating one's life events and past through oral traditions of songs and stories. Thus, in order to recreate the life of this Native woman, we must rely on the written letters, books, and diaries left by the colonists of Jamestown. John Smith, William Strachey, George Percy, Ralph Hamor and Henry Spelman are just a few of the English colonists who left records of Pocahontas and of the culture she came from. However, scholars must scrutinize these sources because the early English settlers were far from unbiased. Writing for an English audience back home in Europe, these colonists had their own agendas and reasons for writing as they did. Some hoped to promote themselves to win royal favor. Others used their writings to defend the Virginia Company of London against its critics. Still others wished to convert the Natives to Christianity and hoped that their writings would inspire and encourage other missionaries. Seeing the world from their own Eurocentric perspectives, the colonists did not always properly understand the events unfolding around them, especially those pertaining to Powhatan culture, traditions, and interactions with foreigners. Historians today must look at their records with a critical eye; gaining as much insight as possible while guarding themselves against the exaggerations and misrepresentations made by people living four hundred years ago.¹

¹ For an excellent discussion of the available sources, see Helen C. Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 1-7.

ETHNOHISTORY

The question becomes, how, in the absence of some sources and with the problems residing in others, can we attain an understanding of Pocahontas's life as she might have experienced it? The dearth of written sources may not be as vital as one might expect. For, as ethnohistorian Raymond Fogelson has persuasively argued, an over reliance on such inscribed documents actually contributes to the construction of profoundly ethnocentric narratives. As a consequence, entire dimensions of history and definitions of historical experience have been written out of the past.¹ Ethnohistory, which I define as an interdisciplinary approach to the past, arose to address this problem. Ethnohistory involves "the use of historical and ethnological methods and materials to gain knowledge of the nature and cause of change in a culture."² My work has been particularly influenced by the ethnohistoric scholarship of three authors: Daniel Richter, Tiya Miles, and Nancy Shoemaker.

In his writings, Richter has shown that it is possible to subvert textual sources by questioning their presumed authenticity. By "reading between the lines" and accounting for cultural bias, documents can be reinterpreted to give more accurate representations of past events.³ Although early records of the Powhatans, written by Europeans, reflect the sociopolitical goals and cultural biases of their authors, descriptions of Native practices and traditions provide indispensable insight into the culture of this Native group.

¹ Raymond D. Fogelson, "The Ethnohistory of Events and Nonevents," *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Spring, 1989), 133-147.

² James Axtell, *Natives and Newcomers: The Cultural Origins of North America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 2. For the latest developments in the field of ethnohistory, see Patricia Galloway, *Practicing Ethnohistory: Mining Archives, Hearing Testimony, Constructing Narrative*, (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2006).

³ Richter, *Facing East from Indian Country*.

However, a full picture of historic events cannot be pieced together through documents alone. Miles' work illustrates that in some instances well-researched "fiction" can add to our interpretations of the past by putting "flesh" onto the dry bones of these events. Through creativity and imaginative writing, scholars can get closer to the actual emotions of historic individuals to recreate this critical aspect of the human experience.¹ In this thesis, I flesh out my analysis with the use of short pieces of historical fiction that introduce my chapters on Pocahontas's experiences in London.

Finally, Shoemaker's research demonstrates the value of exploring the creation of individual and group identity through interpretations of cross-cultural differences and similarities.² By trying to "make sense" of the life-ways and traditions of others, people create and affirm their own sense of personal and cultural identity. In London, Pocahontas came face-to-face with the foreign customs of the English which she interpreted using the tools of her own cultural perspective to make sense of both the similarities and differences she encountered.

Like individuals within any cultural group, members of the Powhatan Empire had their own understanding of reality and of their role in the world. This unique worldview influenced their actions and decisions on a daily basis. Historians studying Pocahontas tend to focus on her visits to Jamestown and the time she spent living among the English colonists. However, it is important to remember that out of her twenty-one years of life, less than four years were spent living within English communities. Although for her first year among the English she was kept relatively isolated from her Powhatan kinsmen, in subsequent years she lived on her

¹ Tiya Miles, Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

² Shoemaker, A Strange Likeness.

English husband's plantation where she had ready access to Powhatan friends and family. Even when she traveled to London, she surrounded herself with Powhatan companions with whom she spoke and interacted in Powhatan cultural terms. Pocahontas thus continued to view the world from her Powhatan cultural perspective and she used this perspective to understand the new world she encountered across the Atlantic.

Through using what James Axtell describes as an "imaginative double vision" it is possible to recreate Pocahontas's perspective through careful research and cultural empathy.¹ However, as scholars, we also have the advantage of hindsight: we can see what Pocahontas could not—the ultimate repercussions of contact between the Powhatans and the English. Through examining Pocahontas's story and her experiences in England, we gain a better understanding of the complex interactions between Natives and newcomers on both sides of the Atlantic. The seventeenth century was a time of enormous change in the Atlantic world. Pocahontas was one individual among many who tried to make sense of the new customs, traditions, and worldviews exposed by cross-cultural contact.

REINTERPRETING A TRANS-ATLANTIC LIFE

In order to recreate the experiences of Pocahontas, I have divided my thesis into two parts. *Part One: The Life of a Legend* consists of two chapters that seek to reveal the truth behind the myth of Pocahontas by reexamining the Jamestown documents and by reviewing the most recent scholarship on this woman's life. The first chapter will focus on her early life as a young Powhatan girl and her initial encounters with the English. The second chapter will continue her story as she grew into a Powhatan woman, faced captivity among the English,

¹ Axtell, Natives and Newcomers, 12.

and ultimately helped broker peace between her people and the foreigners. Both chapters will emphasize her roles and responsibilities within her own culture and will reflect upon how these Powhatan expectations influenced her decisions and interactions with the English.

The second part, entitled *Interpreting a New World*, deals with Pocahontas's experiences as an explorer of London. Each of the three chapters in this section focuses on one event or activity that she encountered during her stay in England. The chapters begin with a fictionalized adaptation of what she might have experienced followed by a careful analysis of what these events might have meant to the Powhatan woman.

The events that I have chosen for analysis are: (1) the Protestant English festival of Bonfire Night on November 5th; (2) the royal Twelfth Night Masque in the court of King James I; and (3) Pocahontas's own illness and coming death. I decided to analyze these particular events for several reasons. First, each event offers intriguing insights into the world that Pocahontas met with in England. Bonfire night was the most widely celebrated holiday on the Jacobean calendar, providing a highlight to England's cold winter months. The Twelfth Night Masque was a courtly display of the English monarchy's wealth and power, meant to impress native courtiers and foreign dignitaries alike. Pocahontas's illness and death reflect the unhealthy living conditions of seventeenth-century London, the English beliefs about dying, and the medical practices of the day.

My second reason for choosing these particular events is that they were almost certainly all activities that Pocahontas experienced while visiting London. Obviously, she participated directly in her own illness and her attendance at the royal masque is well-documented. Even though no precise records attest to her presence at Bonfire Night, it was such a popular holiday that it seems much more improbable that she did *not* participate in the

evening's festivities. Pocahontas experienced these events, making unique interpretations and feeling particular emotional responses to what she saw and heard. For this reason, each occurrence is worthy of our scholarly attention.

Finally, I chose these experiences because of the rich opportunities each presented for cross-cultural analysis. Bonfire Night was more than a jolly celebration; it was a proclamation of power and victory over English enemies. How would Pocahontas have interpreted English use of fire, torture, and effigy-burning to commemorate their nation and religion's triumph? During the Twelfth Night Masque, more was displayed than elaborate scenery and costly attire; the English nobility showed off their attitudes towards gender, homosexuality, race, class, and power relations in the dance. What did Pocahontas make of men dressed as women, blackened body paint, and the king's handsome "favorite"? Finally, Pocahontas's illness gave her the opportunity to experience first-hand English treatments for disease, attitudes towards the afterlife and burial, and hopes for the future generation. How did she react to "bleeding" as a cure, the thought of being buried far from home, and her worries for her young son's future? Through each of my analyses I hope to give a deeper appreciation of both English and Powhatan culture and to show areas where cultural similarities and differences influenced Pocahontas's understanding of the events.

I recognize that although I have done my best to choose events that will allow for far-reaching analysis into many aspects of English and Powhatan cultural life, that my study is far from comprehensive. However, rather than a hindrance, I see this as an opportunity. My research provides a "beginning" for our understanding of one trans-Atlantic Native. This thesis is intended as a provocation that calls for further research rather than as a final statement about absolute "fact" and "truth." I hope that through illustrating what is possible in

ethnohistorical studies of Native Americans in Europe that my work will incite other scholars to pursue similar lines of research. In so doing, we will eventually have a more complete understanding of the complexities of the early trans-Atlantic, colonial world.

As I write these words, the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the founding of Jamestown has begun. This celebration includes exciting new explorations of the place of Jamestown in the Atlantic economy, new work on John Smith and the other colonists, and new archaeological excavations of sites such as the Powhatan capital of Werowocomoco. With so much attention focused on the founding of this American settlement and on the westward voyage that brought the English to Virginia, it is perhaps now pertinent to also examine a trans-Atlantic journey of another kind—one which reversed the roles of Natives and newcomers and saw the Old World as new.

Part One

The Life of a Legend

Chapter One

Growing in the Ways of Her People:

The Early Life of Pocahontas

Pocahontas. A name recognized by thousands, but a woman understood by few. She is the most renowned Native American woman in United States history, yet we know so little about whom she truly was, how she truly felt, and what she truly believed. In popular culture, Pocahontas's story has been repeated many times. In fiction and films she is the beautiful Indian princess who fell in love with John Smith and renounced her own culture in order to save the English. Through this story, Pocahontas has been transformed into the quintessential American, an integral part of the story of the United States. Scholars, however, locate her significance elsewhere. They celebrate her role as an intermediary and emphasize how she acted as a cultural broker between Natives and newcomers. Although in the past some historians couched their analyses in problematic terms by applauding her ability to rise "above the ignorance and savagery of her people," in recent years others have rejected this simplified Eurocentric view by showing that she worked for peace and compromise not just for the benefit of the English, but to protect her own kinsmen.¹ This chapter cuts through the myths and legends of Pocahontas in order to establish an accurate cultural and historical context in which to situate her life. This analysis, in turn, allows for a better understanding of how she would have thought and felt about her fateful voyage to the new world of England

¹ Grace Steele Woodward, Pocahontas, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), 6.

THE ORIGINS OF THE POWHATAN INDIANS

Pocahontas's story begins long before her own birth, with the birth of the Powhatan Indian culture. She grew up in this culture and learned the traditions of her people that had been passed on through generations. But when and how did Powhatan culture arise?

William Strachey, one of the early colonists in Virginia, recorded the Powhatans' account of their creation in the seventeenth century. His Powhatan informants told him how their god, "who takes upon him this shape of a hare" decided to fill the world with creatures, including "divers men and women." After creating the first humans, the Great Hare kept them for a while "in a great bag." However, other spirits, who took the form of giants, discovered the bag in the Great Hare's dwelling-place and wished to devour the men and women. Fortunately, "the godlye hare reproved those cannibal spiritts, and drove them away." The Great Hare went on to create the oceans and streams, the fish, and the land. He also created a great deer, "which should feed upon the land." This final creation drove the four gods of the east, west, north, and south into an envious rage and they conspired to kill the deer "with hunting pooles" and "feasted with him." Despite the malice shown to him by these four gods, the Great Hare took all "the haire of the slaine deare, and spred them upon the earth, with many powerfull words and charmes, whereby every haire became a deare." Finally satisfied that the earth was ready to support humankind, he opened the great bag containing all the men and women and distributed the people across the land, "a man and a woman in one country, and a man and a woman in another country, and so the world tooke his first beginning of mankind."¹

¹ William Strachey, The Historie of Travaile into Virginia Britannia: Expressing the Cosmographie and Comodities of the Country Togither with the Manners and Customes of the People, (London: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005), 98-99.

This tale tells much about Powhatan culture and belief systems. As a hunting and farming people, it makes sense that the Powhatan origin story would include the creation of the deer that they relied upon for protein. This story also warns against greed and jealousy, traits which would have made the community-centered life of the Powhatans difficult and unhappy. The simultaneous creation of male and female humans illustrates the degree of equality enjoyed by Powhatan men and women: both had important tasks to perform within the community and neither could function without the other. Finally, the acknowledgment that “the Great Hare” created many different kinds of people and placed them in different parts of the world may have helped the Powhatans to understand and to come to terms with the English foreigners who arrived on their shores; however, they may also have questioned why these invaders were not content to live in England, the country bestowed upon them by the Great Hare.

Western archaeologists and historians take a different view of the Powhatans’ creation. For them, the Powhatan culture of the seventeenth century can be traced to a migration of people that occurred sometime in the early third century C.E. Archaeological evidence suggests that a new people moved into the Virginian coastal plain during these years and peacefully settled with older populations already established in the region.¹ During these early times, the Powhatans were hunters and foragers, living in small, scattered settlements.² Gradually over the years they began to develop strong community identities. Creating

¹ Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 8.

² Keith Egloff and Deborah Woodward, *First People: The Early Indians of Virginia*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 26.

networks of trade, the early Powhatans of the coastal plain shared ideas and honed their skills in specialized crafts; there is even some evidence for the beginnings of ranked societies.¹

In the early tenth century, the northern hemisphere began to experience a climatic warming trend that had dramatic effects on Indian societies across North America. The warmer weather issued in an agricultural revolution, and the three sister crops of squash, beans, and corn replaced many groups' traditional subsistence patterns of hunting and gathering.² Agricultural development allowed for the creation of complex chiefdoms and the construction of monumental architecture and cities. In the eastern portion of the continent, Mississippian societies arose and dominated the region from 900 to 1350 C.E. Cahokia, a Mississippian city near modern St. Louis, was home to more than twenty thousand people.³ The Mississippians developed widespread trade routes and a complex culture that included elaborate mortuary rituals, specialization of trades, and social stratification. Their culture spread into the southwest corner of modern-day Virginia and Mississippian peoples developed trading relations with the Powhatan peoples of the coastal plain.

These years of warming also brought changes to the Powhatans in other ways. Agriculture, which may have been introduced to Virginia as early as the first century, took on a new importance around 1000 C.E.⁴ Although the new farmers continued to supplement their diets with the rich natural floral and faunal resources of Virginia, people began to live the more sedentary lives of agriculturalists during these years.⁵ Farming communities built

¹ Egloff, First People, 25.

² Richter, Facing East from Indian Country, 5.

³ Richter, Facing East from Indian Country, 3.

⁴ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 8.

⁵ Egloff, First People, 35.

villages of longhouses protected by palisades. Group identities were reinforced as the Powhatans came together to plant and to protect their land.

Unfortunately, the warming trend did not last. By the fourteenth century, the climate began to cool and colder winters and harsher frosts gradually broke down the Mississippians' agricultural-based world.¹ People dispersed from these larger chiefdoms, searching for food. From Ohio to Canada and through an arch that reached all the way to the Chesapeake, Algonquian speaking Indians migrated and settled. Communities decentralized and reorganized. Long distance trade continued throughout the North American continent, but people now lived in smaller village groups, occasionally linked into regional confederacies.²

Fortunately for the Powhatans, the coastal plain of Virginia's rich natural resources insulated them from some of the instability and disorder created by the changing temperatures. Fish and deer were abundant and soil was fertile enough to permit the successful planting of the three sister crops even in colder times. Moreover, four major rivers ran through the area, with many smaller tributaries. These rivers and streams eased travel and communication and became the centers of groups' territories. Soon chiefdoms began to arise and the Powhatan Empire came into its early stages of development.³

Disease struck the Powhatans in the sixteenth century as European microbes made their way through Native North America.⁴ Later, John Smith recalled how the chief Powhatan lamented that he had "seene the death of all my people thrice, and not one living of those 3

¹ Richter, Facing East from Indian Country, 5.

² Richter, Facing East from Indian Country, 6.

³ Helen C. Rountree, Pocahontas's People: The Powhatan Indians of Virginia Through Four Centuries, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 22.

⁴ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 25.

generations, but my selfe.”¹ Disease may have spread from Native peoples who had been in contact with Europeans in Florida or in northern areas like Canada. In addition, Spanish ships made several incursions into Virginia during the sixteenth century; they even established a short-lived Catholic missionary station in 1570.² The diseases brought to the Powhatans through European contact put the region in flux and may have caused a power void that allowed the man Powhatan to become the ruler of a vast area that eventually covered one-fifth of the present state of Virginia.³

THE RISE OF THE POWHATAN EMPIRE

Wahunsenacawh, later to become known as Powhatan, was one of at least six children born into a chiefly family sometime around 1547.⁴ The identity of his parents remains shrouded in mystery, in part due to Powhatan Indian traditions of not naming their dead. What we do know of Powhatan is that by the 1570s he had inherited six chiefdoms from his family: Pamunkey, Youghtanund, Mattaponi, Powhatan town, Arrohateck, and Appamattuck.⁵ After coming into power, Powhatan, who was probably born in the town from which he took his chiefly name, went on to subject other chiefdoms in his area. He may have felt a need to protect his inherited territories from traditional Indian enemies like the Iroquoians to the north and Siouan-speakers to the west, as well as from the strange European foreigners who had made brief stops in the Chesapeake area and founded small settlements like the English

¹ A collection of John Smith's writings can be found in the edited volume by Karen Ordahl Kupperman, Captain John Smith: A Select Edition of His Writings, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 174.

² Rountree, Pocahontas's People, 16.

³ Woodward, Pocahontas, 17.

⁴ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 27.

⁵ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 28.

colony at Roanoke in the late 1580s.¹ By expanding his influence to the surrounding Algonquian chiefdoms, he could ensure his continued control over the people he already ruled.

Some of Powhatan's new alliances were created by marriage: by 1610 the great ruler had around one hundred wives.² According to the documentary record, he kept each wife long enough for her to give birth to a child, thereby creating kinship ties with the groups he ruled. Henry Spelman, a young Jamestown colonist who lived among the Powhatans for a number of months, described this practice. "If any of ye king's wives have once a child by him," Spelman observed, "he keeps her no longer but puts her from him, giving her sufficient copper and beads to maintain her and the child while it is young, and then it is taken from her and maintained by ye king, it now being lawful for her being thus put away to marry with any other."³ The children produced in these unions were then eligible to inherit power from their mother's people, but maintained their loyalty to their father, Powhatan.

In other instances, Powhatan took territories by force. In the mid-1590s, he conquered the chiefdom of Kecoughtan. Following the death of that group's *werowance*, or chief, Powhatan had the new chief murdered and killed all those who resisted the skill of his swift warriors. The survivors he brought back to his own territory to live dispersed among his people.⁴ As John Smith later noted of the Powhatans, "they seldome make warre for lands or

¹ Axtell, Natives and Newcomers, 233.

² Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 33.

³ Many primary documents from the Jamestown colony can be found in the edited volume by Ed Southern, The Jamestown Adventure: Accounts of the Virginia Colony, 1605-1614, (Winston-Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair, 2004), 140.

⁴ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 13.

goods, but for women and children.”¹ The Powhatans thus adopted the women and children of the Kecoughtans, bringing them within the fold of Powhatan’s expanding empire.

THE BIRTH AND EARLY LIFE OF POCAHONTAS

The Jamestown colonists remained silent on the identity of Pocahontas’s mother; however, one historian suggests that a Kecoughtan woman may have borne this daughter to Powhatan.² Undoubtedly quite young—colonists later described Powhatan’s newest wives as being not much more than sixteen or seventeen—Pocahontas’s mother must have been a striking beauty to catch the great chief’s eye.³ Henry Spelman noted that when Powhatan chose a wife, she was always among the “fairest and comliest maids.”⁴ This would have been especially important for a woman who lacked political influence. Whoever she was, Powhatan welcomed her into his household and soon after she gave birth to a daughter.

Sometime in the years between 1595 and 1597 a little girl was born in the village of Werowocomoco. Small and precious with black eyes and hair, she would have been received with great joy by the bustling household of the mamanitowik, the great chief of the Powhatans. The child’s parents named their daughter Amonute and she was presented to the village amidst much festivity. The little girl was also given a secret, private name, a name of power known only to her closest relatives. This name may have been Matoaka, which meant “One Who Is Kindled.”⁵ In later years, Samuel Purchas described the girl’s revelation of her true name to the English, following her marriage to an Englishman. “Her true name was

¹ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 145.

² Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 13.

³ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 91.

⁴ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 140.

⁵ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 127.

Matoes [sic], which they concealed from the English,” he noted in ethnocentric fashion, “in a superstitious fear of hurt by the English.”¹

After Matoaka’s birth, she and her mother were probably sent away by Powhatan, in accordance with tradition. They may have gone to live with maternal relatives in another village, or, if the mother was Kecoughtan, with kinsmen dispersed within the village of Werowocomoco. During these years, Matoaka began to learn the customs and traditions of her people. She probably gained knowledge of Powhatan agricultural practices, including the intercropping of corns, beans, and squash. She would have learned to plant four or five kernels of corn together with two beans in a single hole so that when the corn grew, the beans could creep up the stalks for support.² John Smith later described how the Powhatans tended to their gardens: “Their women and children do continually keepe it with weeding, and when it is growne midle high, they hill it about like a hop-yard.”³ Matoaka may also have learned to make cordage and weave baskets. Perhaps she watched her mother and the other women process deer hides. Following the example of her kinswomen, little Matoaka would have made mats, pots, and mortars for grinding corn flour. She would also have become skilled in pounding corn, making bread, and preparing meals.⁴ Like every Powhatan child, she would have contributed to her community’s survival through sharing in the burdens of daily life.

Life was not all work, however. Matoaka would also have participated in the ceremonies and festivals of her people. These festivities included feasts, sports, and dancing. Henry Spelman later described the Powhatan pastimes from his experiences living among them: “When they meet at feasts or otherwise they use sports much like to our here in

¹ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 127.

² Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 144.

³ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 138.

⁴ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 142.

England...They use beside football play, which women and young boys do much play at...”¹

Matoaka probably also enjoyed the company of cousins and other young relatives. She may even have helped raise some of her younger half-siblings. By playing in the fields and forests around the village, these children learned the lay of their homeland and by observing their parents they absorbed the proper behavior expected of adult Powhatan men and women.

When Matoaka was old enough to no longer need constant care and supervision, she went to live in her father’s household.² Her mother may have died around this time: later records are unusually silent about this woman who, if she had lived, would have undoubtedly attended her daughter’s marriage or at least visited her home among the English years later. In her new environment, Matoaka continued her education in Powhatan life-ways, learning the necessary skills of Powhatan women from her father’s many young wives. Around this time Matoaka also received her famous nickname: Pocahontas. In coastal Virginian Algonquian, the name means “mischief” or “little playful one;” this perhaps tells us something of the character of the young girl.³ Humorous and mischievous, Pocahontas soon became a favorite with her father. John Smith later recounted that Powhatan “much esteemed” the young child who “not only for feature, countenance, and proportion, much exceedeth any of the rest of his people, but for wit and spirit, the only Nonpareil of his country.”⁴

THE ARRIVAL OF THE ENGLISH

Powhatan existence was forever altered in April 1607 with the arrival of three English ships in the James River. Determined to successfully compete with their European rivals in

¹ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 147.

² Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 16.

³ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 14.

⁴ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 87.

New World acquisitions of territory and wealth, Englishmen aboard the *Susan Constant*, the *Godspeed*, and the *Discovery* set out to colonize the land that they called Virginia. Hoping to find gold, a passage to the Pacific, and lost colonists from an earlier settlement at Roanoke, these men came to America with the financial support of the Virginia Company of London. Establishing themselves on the James River, the colonists soon elected a president, Edward Maria Wingfield, and set about building a fort.¹

Pocahontas's people initially did not know what to make of the colonists. They had come across Europeans before and the results had usually been unfavorable. Perhaps for this reason, a group of Indians assaulted the English as soon as they touched shore. "Captain Archer and Matthew Morton were shot," but survived and Captain Newport returned fire "which the Indians little respected, but having spent their arrows, retired without harm."² On the other hand, the foreigners brought trade goods desirable to the Powhatans. Lacking a native supply of metal, the English hatchets and farming tools seemed especially attractive to these agriculturalists.

In the early months, Pocahontas's father, the mamanitowik Powhatan, did not state any official policy towards the foreigners. Instead, he permitted his lesser chiefs, or werowances, to deal with the intruders on an individual basis.³ Some groups chose to trade with the English. The Arsathecks, for example, "kindly entertained" the English, even giving them a Native guide.⁴ However, for the groups in the immediate vicinity of the newly constructed fort, the English arrival was not as welcome. Four hundred Wominchopunk

¹ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 56.

² Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 56.

³ Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 53.

⁴ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 57.

warriors assaulted the English only two weeks after they had begun to unload their supplies.¹ The Paspaheghs and the Quiyoughcohannocks were likewise ill-pleased with the invasion of foreigners.

In late June, 1607, Powhatan finally sent a messenger to Jamestown, offering friendship and a cessation of hostilities.² In the meantime, the newly arrived colonists were experiencing difficulties of their own. Poor sanitation and brackish drinking water led to an outbreak of disease at the fort. John Smith, one of the colony's council members, later wrote: "God (being angry with us) plagued us with such famine and sickness that the living were scarce able to bury the dead."³ The English had brought insufficient food supplies and disease and hunger made them too weak to hunt, gather, or grow crops for themselves. By September, Wingfield had been replaced by John Radcliffe as president, and the Powhatans, noticing the deplorable state of the foreigners and pitying their weakness, sent gifts of food to Jamestown.⁴

THE CAPTURE OF JOHN SMITH

As summer turned to fall and Pocahontas prepared to harvest the crops planted by her kinswomen, the colonists of Jamestown began to feel the pangs of hunger once again. John Smith, in an effort to save the failing colony, made several expeditions up and down the land's large rivers to trade English copper and hatchets for Powhatan corn. First, he visited Kecoughtan, a village now ruled by one of Pocahontas's many half-brothers. He was well-received and soon made another voyage to trade with the Warraskoyacks.⁵ A third voyage

¹ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 61.

² Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 62.

³ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 59.

⁴ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 60.

⁵ Price, Love and Hate in Jamestown, 56.

took him to the territory of the Paspaheghs, who reluctantly traded “10 or 12 bushels of corn,” despite their dissatisfaction that the English would not give them their “pieces and swords.” The village of the Chickahominies, an Algonquian group that had managed to remain independent from the Powhatan Empire, also received a visit from Smith, who “showed them what copper and hatchets they should have for corn.”¹ Together, these voyages provided the Jamestown colonists with the food they needed to survive the autumn months.

In early December, Smith decided to make yet another voyage into Powhatan territory, this time to look for the mythical passage to the Pacific Ocean.² While on this journey, Smith hired two Native guides to lead him further upstream by canoe. Telling most of his English companions to stay in their barge, “with express charge not any to go ashore till [his] return,” Smith proceeded upriver with the two guides and two of his fellow colonists.³ Twenty miles into their journey, the men made a stop to cook a meal on shore. Smith, wishing to do a little exploring on his own, left his two English companions and set out with one of the Native guides. In Smith’s own words, “within a quarter of an hour I heard a loud cry, and a hollowing of Indians, but no warning piece.”⁴ Deep in Powhatan territory, Smith and his companions had inadvertently stumbled into the middle of a hunting expedition led by Opechancanough, werowance of the Pamunkey and brother of the great mamanitowik, Powhatan. Losing no time against the intruders, Pocahontas’s uncle and his men killed Smith’s English companions and took Smith prisoner.⁵

¹ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 62.

² Price, Love and Hate in Jamestown, 59.

³ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 66.

⁴ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 66.

⁵ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 67.

For the next few weeks, John Smith's Native captors led him on a tour of Powhatan villages. All the while, Smith was terrified that they would execute him, "yet they used [him] with what kindness they could."¹ Correctly perceiving Smith as a leader among the foreign settlers, the Powhatans treated him with the same respect as they would any captured werowance. He was welcomed to villages with dances and amply fed: "a quarter of venison and some ten pound of bread I had for supper."² In addition, the Powhatans permitted him to send a message to Jamestown to tell his fellow Englishmen of his capture.

Finally, in late December, John Smith was brought to Werowocomoco, Pocahontas's home and the capital of the Powhatan Empire. Here he was greeted by the mamanitowik himself who wished to question Smith about the English's intentions in his territory. Powhatan "kindly welcomed [Smith] with such good words, and great platters of sundry victuals, assuring [him] his friendship, and [his] liberty within four days."³ This was Smith's impression of his time in Werowocomoco in 1608. Years later, however, Captain John Smith would tell another story.

POCAHONTAS'S "RESCUE" OF JOHN SMITH

Perhaps the best-known and most celebrated event of Pocahontas's life was her dramatic rescue of John Smith from the purportedly murderous intentions of her father. This event is where Pocahontas comes into history as defined by western historians. Every novel, play, and film about the Powhatan "princess" includes this climatic occurrence as proof of Pocahontas's love of the English and especially as proof of her feelings towards John Smith.

¹ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 67.

² Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 68.

³ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 69.

However, Smith did not mention the rescue in his writings of 1608, nor in the books he published in 1612.¹ Only in 1624, seven years after the death of Pocahontas, who by then was well-known to the English for her marriage to an Englishman and for her journey to London, did John Smith tell the following story:

Having seated him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then as many as could laid hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs to beat out his brains, Pocahontas, the King's dearest daughter, when no entreaty could prevail, got his head in her arms, and laid her own upon his to save him from death...²

Smith wrote his notorious rescue scene two years after Opechancanough led a massacre against the expanding English in Virginia. By then, feelings in England towards the Powhatans were less than friendly and Englishmen were more than willing to see the “civilized” Pocahontas as an exception among her supposedly savage people. In addition, modern readers of Smith’s dramatic account must keep in mind that in the seventeenth century authors did not draw the same firm line between fact and fiction as we do today. John Smith was free to embellish his stories to add interest, romance, and excitement. In fact, his later autobiographies include several “rescues;” each time he found himself saved from peril by a beautiful young woman. Smith, a man of humble birth, had many reasons for wanting to promote himself as dashing and courageous adventurer, not least of all his hopes to gain crown support for colonial ventures in New England. With most of the colonists dead who could dispute his claims, Smith published his dramatic story for an eager English audience.³

¹ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 53.

² Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 91.

³ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 81; Woodward, Pocahontas, 181; Price, Love and Hate in Jamestown, 228.

One early Jamestown colonist was still alive in 1624, however. George Percy, a nobleman who had been president of Jamestown during the Starving Time, read Smith's account with disgust. Feeling himself maligned by Smith, who had questioned Percy's leadership abilities in his *Generall Historie of Virginia*, Percy wrote the following of Smith: "the author hath not spared to appropriate many desserts to himself which he never performed, and stuffed his relations with so many falsities and malicious detractions, not only of this point and time which I have selected to treat of, but of former occurrences also..."¹ Although Percy was most especially upset about Smith's treatment of the Starving Time, it seems quite likely that Smith, "an ambitious, unworthy, and vainglorious fellow," also added "falsities" to his story of his time in Werowocomoco.²

Historians first began to question Smith's 1624 account of his rescue in the 1860s when Charles Deane, a scholar from Massachusetts, wrote a tract disputing the famed captain's reliability.³ Later writers accused Deane of simply having a bias against Smith as an early southerner during a time when the North and South were headed to Civil War. The debate over whether Pocahontas truly saved Smith continues to this day. In 2003, popular writer David A. Price again insisted that the rescue occurred, while in 2005 the noted anthropologist Helen C. Rountree proclaimed that, "Pocahontas was probably nowhere near her father and his guest when the 'rescue' is supposed to have happened."⁴ Other writers, like

¹ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 152.

² Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 155.

³ Faery, *Cartographies of Desire*, 113.

⁴ Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 78.

Paula Gunn Allen, feel that the rescue was in fact an elaborate adoption ceremony where Smith had to be ritually killed and saved before becoming “son” to Powhatan.¹

The debate over whether Pocahontas saved Smith, although interesting, does not answer the central question of what it would have been like to be a young girl living within the Powhatan Empire. From a Powhatan cultural standpoint, Pocahontas’s rescue of John Smith appears unlikely. As a girl of only ten or eleven years, Pocahontas probably would not have even attended the diplomatic event of Smith’s meeting with the mamanitowik. Rather, she would have been busy preparing the guest’s feast with the other girls and women of the household. Moreover, the idea that Powhatan would kill Smith with clubs is improbable. Such beatings were given only to Powhatan criminals, while enemy captives traditionally met their end through ceremonial torture.²

Despite never being threatened with death, Smith probably was adopted during his stay in Werowocomoco. In his 1624 account, Smith made mention of an adoption ceremony:

Two dayes after, Powhatan having disguised himselfe in the most fearefullest manner he could, caused Captaine Smith to be brought forth to a great house in the woods, and there upon a mat by the fire to be left alone. Not long after from behinde a mat that divided the house, was made the mose dolefullest noyse he ever heard; then Powhatan more like a devil then a man with some two hundred more as blacke as himselfe, came unto him and told him now they were friends, and presently he should goe to James towne, to send him two great gunnes, and a grindstone, for which he would give him the Country of Capahowosick, and for ever esteeme him as his sonne Nantaquoud.³

Although undoubtedly an embellished account, it does seem likely that there was a core of truth in this assertion. In the months that followed Smith’s capture, Powhatan treated the colonists to gifts of food befitting of a valued ally. Years later, when Pocahontas met

¹ Paula Gunn Allen, *Pocahontas: Medicine Woman, Spy, Entrepreneur, Diplomat*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2004), 54.

² Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 77; Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 55.

³ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 65.

Smith in England, she addressed him in kinship terms.¹ By adopting John Smith, Powhatan would have hoped to create a binding alliance with the newcomer; an alliance that would protect both Powhatans and Englishmen and ensure good trade relations. In addition, through this adoption, Powhatan asserted his power over the colonists: they were united through ties of mutual obligations, but he was the “father,” Smith the “son.” Powhatan, the mamanitowik, had simply added another lesser werowance to his Empire.

During John Smith’s short stay in Werowocomoco, Pocahontas may have briefly met the Englishman who was to feature her so prominently in his later accounts. Like the other women and children in the town, Pocahontas would have been curious about the stranger.² However, unlike the romanticized story portrayed in modern films, the eleven-year-old girl and twenty-six-year-old man probably had nothing more than a few short meetings in the presence of many other curious Powhatans, if they met at all.³

After a few days of feasting, Powhatan released Smith and sent him “home with four men: one that usually carried [Smith’s] gown and knapsack after [him], two other loaded with bread, and one to accompany [Smith].”⁴ Back at the fort, everything was in its usual disarray. Smith’s fellow colonists blamed him for the deaths of those Englishmen who had traveled with him upriver, and he was only saved from hanging by the arrival of a new supply ship captained by Christopher Newport.⁵ Not long after, a fire blazed through the fort, destroying most of the supplies and leaving the colonists hungry once again. Fortunately for the English, Powhatan did not forget the relationship he had created with Smith and he sent presents of

¹ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 72.

² Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 59.

³ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 84.

⁴ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 71.

⁵ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 72.

food to the fort every few days.¹ Although there are no records that attest to the fact, Pocahontas may have visited the fort occasionally as well, although she probably did not play an important role as emissary at this time.

A PRECARIOUS ALLIANCE

In the early spring of 1608, as Pocahontas helped her kinswomen prepare the soil for planting, the village of Werowocomoco received two foreign visitors: Captain Newport and John Smith. At this meeting, Powhatan renewed his alliance with Smith: “with a loud oration he proclaimed me a Werowance of Powhatan, and that all his subjects should so esteem us, and no man account us strangers nor Paspahagans, but Powhatans, and that the corn, women, and country should be to us as to his own people.”² Through this declaration of friendship, Pocahontas’s father once again hoped to cement an alliance and avoid conflict with the newcomers. During the visit, the English and Powhatans also exchanged children. “A boy of thirteen years old, called Thomas Savage” was given to Powhatan “as his son” so that he could learn the Algonquian language and become an interpreter.³ In return, Namontack was delivered to the English to accompany Newport to England “to know our strength and our country’s condition.”⁴ Thomas Savage was not much older than Pocahontas and it is possible that she befriended the boy during his stay in Werowocomoco. On later visits to Jamestown, she could communicate using some English and it is likely that Savage was her teacher.⁵ The exchange in children also served as a symbol of the English and Powhatan alliance.

¹ Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 84.

² Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 75.

³ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 77.

⁴ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 82.

⁵ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 68.

Despite the friendly speeches, feasts, and exchange of people, the visit was not entirely successful. Powhatan “expected to have all [the English] lay their arms at his feet, as did his subjects,” but the English refused to comply, arguing that it “was a ceremony [their] enemies desired,” not their allies.¹ The English also refused to trade their weapons to the Powhatans. In the months that followed, skirmishes broke out between the Natives and newcomers and Powhatans endeavored to get English arms through stealth if not by trade. According to Smith in 1608: “At our fort, the tools we had were so ordinarily stolen by the Indians, as necessity enforced us to correct their braving the every: for he that stole today, durst come again the next day.”² In April, events came to a head when the Jamestown colonists captured a group of Paspahegh Indians.³ When ambassadors of the Paspaheghs came to ask for the release of their relatives, John Smith informed them that they should bring back “what spades, shovels, swords, or tools they had stolen...if not, the next day, they should hang.”⁴ Smith proceeded to terrify his captives “first with the rack, then with muskets” until they confessed “the names of them that stole our tools and swords; and that Powhatan received them.”⁵

POCAHONTAS AS EMISSARY

Not long after the English had taken the Paspaheghs captive, Pocahontas’s father sent a diplomatic mission to Jamestown to secure their release. Among the emissaries was the

¹ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 75.

² Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 82.

³ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 102.

⁴ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 85.

⁵ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 85-87.

young girl herself, “a child of ten years old.”¹ Smith’s 1608 account of her arrival at the fort is the earliest English record of Pocahontas and the event may have been the first time she traveled to Jamestown. By sending his young daughter, Powhatan also sent a strong message to the English: he wanted peace and friendship. Rawhunt, Powhatan’s main messenger, explained to Smith that Powhatan so “loved and respected” him that “he had sent his child, which he most esteemed to see [Smith], a deer and bread besides, for a present.”²

Pocahontas’s presence may have served a practical purpose as well: by then she had learned some English and could serve as a translator for her people.³ Fortunately, Smith understood the symbolic gesture of Pocahontas’s visit to the fort, and “after prayer gave [the captives] to Pocahontas, the King’s daughter, in regard of her father’s kindness in sending her.”⁴

In the months that followed, an uneasy truce was established between the Powhatans and the English. Pocahontas came to visit the fort regularly, both to deliver food as her father’s emissary and to befriend the few young boys who lived there. Later, the colonist William Strachey recalled that she would play with the English boys “and make them wheel falling on their hands, turning their heels upwards, whom she would follow and wheel herself so naked as she was all the fort over.”⁵ During her visits, Pocahontas also established a friendship with John Smith. In his later writings, Smith included the Algonquian phrase, “Kekaten pokahontas pariaquagh ningh tanks maanotyens neer mowchick rawrenock audowgh,” which meant “Bid Pokahontas bring hither tow little Baskets, and I wil give her

¹ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 87.

² Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 87.

³ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 70.

⁴ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 87.

⁵ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 65.

white beads to make her a chaine.”¹ Pocahontas enjoyed receiving gifts from the English and in return she helped teach John Smith some of her language.

A MYTHICAL ROMANCE

In the myth of Pocahontas, she and John Smith become lovers. However, historically this claim is unsubstantiated and rejected by scholars. The one historical reference that can be interpreted as implying such a relationship comes from Smith. Just before his 1609 return to England, he came under attack from fellow colonists unhappy with his harsh form of leadership. These rivals and malcontents leveled many accusations against Smith, including that “hee would have made himselfe a king, by marrying Pocahontas, Powhatans daughter.”² In his 1612 writings, Smith defended himself by stating, “It is true she was the very nonparell of his kingdome, and at most not past 13 or 14 yeares of age...but her marriage could no way have intitled him by any right to the kingdome, nor was it ever suspected hee had ever such a thought, or more regarded her, or any of them, then in honest reason and discreation he might.”³ Modern writers like David A. Price suggest that Pocahontas could have been infatuated with Smith, while others like Camilla Townsend argue that Smith may have harbored some pedophilic feelings towards the young girl.⁴ The first claim derives support from the reports of Pocahontas’s rescues of Smith; the initial and disputed “beat out his brains” rescue and more especially her later warning to Smith of her father’s intent to ambush and kill him.⁵ The latter claim is supported by Smith’s own statement that “if he would he

¹ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 137.

² Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 128.

³ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 128.

⁴ Price, Love and Hate in Jamestown, 103; Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 74.

⁵ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 128.

might have married her, or have done what him listed...for there was none that could have hindered his determination.”¹ However, both Price and Townsend agree that an actual romantic or sexual relationship did not occur. Pocahontas remained prepubescent during Smith’s entire stay in Virginia and by the customs and traditions of her people such an adult-child union would have been unacceptable. At most, Pocahontas perhaps felt a girlish crush for Smith, or was repulsed and embarrassed by his lewd glances at her. Most likely their relationship was nothing more than a friendship and she regarded Smith as though he were an adopted older male relative. When she met him in England years later, she called him “father” and insisted that he call her “child.”²

GROWING IN THE WAYS OF HER PEOPLE

When reading the writings of the Jamestown colonists, one might easily gain the impression that Pocahontas was constantly at the Jamestown fort, spending all of her free time learning English ways. This was not the case. Although she came often as an emissary for her father, bringing the colonists “so much provision, that saved many of their lives,” the majority of her time was spent in Werowocomoco with her family and the other Powhatans.³ She continued to develop in the cultural fold of her kinsmen, learning more as she aged about what it meant to be a Powhatan woman. Much of her time was probably spent in the Powhatan gardens and cornfields. The cooler temperatures of the early seventeenth century meant that crops were not as plentiful as in previous years, a fact lost on the English colonists

¹ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 128.

² Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 72.

³ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 66.

who simply believed that the Powhatans were denying them food.¹ Pocahontas, her kinswomen, and her fellow children would have spent hours weeding the cornfields, or hunting for wild plants and tubers in the Virginian forests. During their time outdoors the women undoubtedly shared stories, sang songs, and exchanged family gossip. Among the community-centered Powhatans, the evenings would also have been time of gathering; a time to enjoy each other's company and a time to pass down traditions through song, dance, and storytelling.

THE "CROWNING" OF POWHATAN

In the meantime, relations between the Pocahontas's people and the English maintained an uneasy balance. The colonists, once again dissatisfied with their leadership, deposed Radcliffe and elected John Smith as president. In late September, 1608, Captain Newport returned from England with another supply of food and also with a message from King James I: the colonists were to "honor" Powhatan in a crowning ceremony.² Far from being a show of respect, however, this ceremony was intended to make Powhatan a vassal of the English king, much in the same way that Powhatan had made Smith a lesser werowance through adoption. John Smith was not pleased with the proposition for other reasons. He believed that "this stately kinde of soliciting" would only make Powhatan "so much overvalue himselfe, that he respected [the English] as much as nothing at all."³ However, Newport was determined and so Smith reluctantly set out on journey to Werowocomoco to ask Powhatan to come to Jamestown to receive his crown. Powhatan was not fooled by the Englishman's

¹ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 62.

² Price, Love and Hate in Jamestown, 92.

³ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 166.

request. He stated solemnly, “If your King have sent me Presents, I also am a King, and this is my land: eight dayes I will stay to receive them. Your father is to come to me, not I to him, nor yet to your Fort, neither will I bite at such a bait.”¹ Soon thereafter, Captain Newport came to Werowocomoco for the coronation. Powhatan accepted the gifts, “but a foule trouble there was to make him kneele to receive his Crowne...at last by leaning hard on his shoulders, he a little stooped, and three having the crowne in their hands put it on his head.”² In exchange for their “kindnesse” and the gifts they bestowed upon him, Powhatan gave “his old shooes and his mantel” to Newport so that the captain could convey them to King James.³ From a Powhatan cultural standpoint, gift-giving was an essential element of alliance-building and so Powhatan felt obligated to return the favor, although he was undoubtedly suspicious of the true purposes of the coronation.

With Powhatan’s coronation, English relations with the Virginian Natives reached a turning point. Eager to establish their dominance in the new world of Virginia, Englishmen hoped to gain power over Pocahontas’s people. Although this play for power began with a seemingly innocuous symbolic gesture, soon violent conflicts would erupt. Faced with men who were determined to challenge his authority, Powhatan came to rely on his daughter as his own symbol for Powhatan-English relations. As she reached early adulthood, Pocahontas became an important player in the Virginian arena, using her skills as negotiator to push for peace in a world on the brink of destruction.

¹ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 169.

² Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 169.

³ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 169.

Chapter Two

Negotiating Two Worlds:

Pocahontas as Peacemaker

As the English expanded their influence in the Powhatan heartland, the region's mamanitowik was faced with difficult decisions. Powhatan struggled to maintain peace between two cultures that were constantly coming into conflict in order to protect his own people from destruction. In his efforts, Powhatan found a valuable ally: his daughter. Pocahontas was a bright girl who already had some experience with the foreigners. As an innocent child, she was a trusted symbol of Powhatan friendship to the English. However, as hostilities continued, her role as an emissary grew too dangerous and she withdrew from her symbolic role as negotiator. When events conspired to draw her back into the English-Powhatan arena, however, she was ready to resume her role as mediator. Well-versed in the Powhatan cultural traditions of alliance building, she continued her father's efforts to create a lasting peace with the newcomers for the sake of her people.

THE DETERIORATION OF POWHATAN AND ENGLISH RELATIONS

In the months that followed Powhatan's coronation, relations deteriorated between the colonists and the Powhatans. The English angered Powhatan by making unauthorized voyages into his territory and by meeting with the Monacans, the traditional Siouan enemies of the coastal Algonquians.¹ As autumn turned to winter, the English once again looked to the

¹ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 115.

Powhatans for food. However, crops had been poor that year and the Indians were increasingly reluctant to trade with the foreigners. What they could not have through trade, the English began to take by force. Through violent raids on Powhatan villages, the English took food from the very mouths of Native women and children: “The people imparted what little they had, with such complaints and tears from the women and children; as he had bin too cruell to be a Christian that would not have bin satisfied and moved with compassion.”¹

Finally, in December 1608, John Smith led an expedition to Werowocomoco to procure corn from Powhatan himself.² Powhatan received the English with kindness, but made it clear that he would not trade with the colonists for anything less than their European weapons: “none he liked without guns and swords, valuing a basket of corn more precious than a basket of copper, saying he could eat his corn, but not the copper.”³ By this time, Powhatan had grown deeply suspicious of the English. The Native boy, Namontack, had returned from England with stories of its vast population and overcrowded capital city. Powhatan told Smith: “some doubt I have of your coming hither, that makes me not so kindly seek to relieve you as I would; for many do inform me, your coming hither is not for trade, but to invade my people, and possess my country.”⁴ Powhatan’s people were becoming restless and deeply disturbed by the aggressions of the English foreigners. As mamanitowik, Powhatan was their leader but not an absolute dictator: he had to listen to the concerns of his werowances. He demanded of Smith, “what will it avail you to take by force you may quickly have by love, or to destroy them that provide you food?”⁵ Disgusted that the English once

¹ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 78.

² Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 79.

³ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 95.

⁴ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 96.

⁵ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 98.

again refused to lay down their weapons in his presence, Powhatan reminded Smith of his obligations to the mamanitowik: “Captain Smith, I never use any werowance so kindly as yourself, yet from you I receive the least kindness of any.”¹ Smith and his compatriots had failed to live up to the standards expected of a Powhatan ally. Powhatan felt disappointed and saddened. Carefully he weighed his options for what to do with the Englishmen.

POCAHONTAS’S SECOND “RESCUE” OF SMITH

Later that night, Smith and his English companions sat together in a Powhatan longhouse. As Smith recounted later, “Pocahontas, his dearest jewel and daughter, in that dark night came through the irksome woods, and told our captain great cheer should be sent us by and by; but Powhatan and all the power he could make would after come kill us all.”² This second rescue of Smith by Pocahontas is not as disputed as the first: Smith mentioned it in his 1612 account as well as in his later writings.³ Some historians have interpreted this rescue as Pocahontas’s true compassion and care for the English colonists. This may have indeed been the case. Over the months she had come to know many of the Jamestown settlers and she may have balked at the idea that these men, her friends, should be unceremoniously murdered by her father. However, it is important to remember that at this point, Pocahontas was still little more than a child of perhaps twelve or thirteen years. Would such a young girl take it upon herself to interfere with adult business? Would she have risked the lives and welfare of her Powhatan friends and kinsmen to rescue foreigners? Another possibility is that Powhatan sent Pocahontas to the English himself. Just as he had used her as a symbol of friendship and trust

¹ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 99.

² Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 101.

³ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 80.

in order to procure the release of the Paspahugh captives, so too may he have used her to warn the English in a delicate play of politics and power. Knowing that the child's innocent tears would move the English as his harshest threats could not, Powhatan perhaps chose to express his displeasure with the English "from the mouths of babes." Powhatan was in a difficult position. His werowances were deeply unhappy and ready to attack the English. Meanwhile, he was preparing to secretly remove his capital and corn supply away from the colonists, deeper into his territory.¹ He knew that to kill the English now would be ineffective: Namontack's report showed that there were plenty more Englishmen who would undoubtedly come to avenge their companions, just as Spanish soldiers had done when the Powhatans destroyed a Jesuit mission years before. Powhatan did not want to risk engaging in open warfare with the English. As he had told John Smith earlier that evening,

Think you I am so simple, not to know it is better to eat good meat, lie well, and sleep quietly with my women and children, laugh and be merry with you, have copper, hatchets, or what I want being your friend, than be forced to fly from all, to lie cold in the woods, feed upon acorns, roots, and such trash, and be so hunted by you, that I can neither rest, eat, nor sleep?²

By using his beloved daughter as a messenger, Powhatan could avoid the strife that would undoubtedly arise if he killed the Englishmen. Moreover, he could maintain his position of strength with his werowances. In this context, Pocahontas became the trusted confidant of her powerful father. She helped him maintain the peace for the benefit of her people.

A BROKEN ALLIANCE

Smith and his companions escaped Werowocomoco with their lives, but were nearly ambushed again when they made a stop in a village ruled by Opechancanough, Powhatan's

¹ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 80.

² Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 99.

brother. Again hoping to get corn for the hungry colonists, John Smith told the werowance, “You know my want, and I your plenty, of which by some meanes I must have part, remember it is fit for kings to keepe their promise.”¹ Opechancanough seemed to agree to Smith’s request, but soon the English found themselves betrayed as six hundred Pamunky warriors surrounded them. Whether or not the colonists were correct in assuming that Opechancanough planned to kill them is uncertain; their reaction, however, is not. Smith took his pistol and “in such a rage snatched the king by his vambrace in the midst of his men, with his pistol ready bent against his brest.”² He led Opechancanough outdoors and “all his men were easily intreated to cast downe their armes, little dreaming anie durst in that manner have used their king.”³ The English escaped, but Opechancanough was not to soon forget this terrible insult. In later years when he took over the Powhatan leadership, he employed a much harder stance against the English than had his brother.

In the midst of all the confusion, skirmishes, and raids in the weeks that followed, Powhatan quietly moved his capital to a place called Orapax, at the top of the Chickahominy River.⁴ Pocahontas undoubtedly moved along with her father. Her visits to Jamestown had decreased over the tumultuous fall; now they stopped completely. The Jamestown colonists were no longer friends and their fort was not safe for the young woman.

Hostilities continued into 1609. Smith trained the colonists to become soldiers and led raids into Powhatan villages. If the Powhatans resisted or retaliated, “He burnt their houses, tooke their Boats, with all their fishing wires, and planted some of them at James towne for

¹ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 179.

² Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 180.

³ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 180.

⁴ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 129.

his owne use.”¹ The situation worsened when John Radcliffe, Gabriel Archer, and John Martin returned from a trip to England and claimed leadership of the Jamestown colony: “That disorderlie company tormented those poore naked soules, by stealing their corne, robbing their gardens, beating them, breaking their houses, and keeping some prisoners.”² Still hoping that John Smith might remember his obligations to them, the Powhatans appealed to the captain, complaining that “he had brought them for protectors worse enemies then the Monocans themselves; which though till then, (for his love) they had indured: they desired pardon, if hereafter they defended themselves.”³

In October, a gunpowder accident sent Smith back to England, never to return to the Jamestown colony. This departure may have in fact saved his life. Soon thereafter, the Powhatans “all revolted, and did spoile and murther all they incountered.”⁴ One of the early victims was John Radcliffe. During a trading expedition to Powhatan’s capital, Radcliffe “with about thirtie others as carelesse as himselfe, were all slaine.”⁵ John Smith later claimed that Pocahontas “saved a boy called Henry Spilman” from the ritualized torture suffered by Radcliffe and his companions.⁶ However, this claim is unsubstantiated by Henry Spelman’s own accounts of the incident. As an adopted son of Powhatan, like Thomas Savage had been before him, Spelman was in little danger in any case.

In the months that followed, violence escalated in Virginia. George Percy took over the colony’s leadership and the English continued their raids against the Powhatans. When the Indians fought back, the English “burned their howses, Ransaked their Temples, Tooke

¹ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 190.

² Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 124.

³ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 124-125.

⁴ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 129.

⁵ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 129.

⁶ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 129.

downe the Corpes of the deade kings from of their Toambes, and caryed away their pearles, copper and bracelets, where with they doe decore their kings funeralles.”¹ The colonists also murdered those Indians who refused to trade. On a trading expedition to the Potomacs, Captain Francis West “used some harshe and crewel dealings by cutteinge of towe of the salvages heads and other extemetyes.”² Perhaps most shocking of all to the Powhatans was the English treatment of the captured wife and children of the Paspahegh werowance: the children were thrown into the river and shot to death, the wife put “to the sword.”³

What Pocahontas made of the growing violence is unknown. She probably felt the same shock and sorrow upon hearing of the atrocities as did her kinsmen. What love she may have borne the English during her childhood would have faded as the colonists repeatedly attacked her people and broke all of their obligations as allies. However, at her father’s distant capital at Orapax, Pocahontas had other things to think about. While Jamestown sank into the “Starving Time” of the winter of 1609-1610, she was undergoing her own changes. She grew up during these months and became a woman.

POCAHONTAS’S EXPERIENCES AS A POWHATAN WOMAN

In Powhatan culture, children were permitted to go about naked, as Pocahontas had done when she cartwheeled with the English boys a couple of years earlier. However, upon attaining womanhood, Pocahontas would have been expected to show modesty: “the women are always covered about their middles with a skin, and very shamefast to be seene bare.”⁴ She would also have decorated her body with tattoos: “Their women, some have their legs,

¹ Axtell, Natives and Newcomers, 245.

² Axtell, Natives and Newcomers, 245.

³ Price, Love and Hate in Jamestown, 143.

⁴ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 141.

hands, breasts, and face cunningly imbrodered with divers workes, as beasts, serpents, artificially wrought into their flesh with blacke spots.”¹ Later, when her portrait was made in England she was shown wearing a gown with a high collar and long sleeves; perhaps these lengths of fabric helped disguise such “uncivilized” markings.

After undergoing puberty, Pocahontas was also expected to marry. That she did so is confirmed by the writings of William Strachey, who recorded in 1612 that she was “nowe married to a private captaine called Kocoum some two yeares since.”² Kocoum may have been one of the warriors among her father’s bodyguard, but little else is known about the man.³ He probably lacked any political power, which suggests that she married him by choice and not to create a political alliance.⁴ In order to authorize the marriage, the young groom-to-be would have had to pay an appropriate bridewealth and gain permission from both her family and his. The ceremony of Powhatan marriages was later described by Henry Spelman:

At her coming to him, her father or chief friends joins the hands together and then ye father or chief friend of ye man bringeth a long string of beads and measuring his arm’s length thereof doth break it over ye hands of those that are to be married while their hands be joined together, and gives it unto ye woman’s father or him that brings her. And so with much mirth and feasting they go together.⁵

Pocahontas’s marriage brought her fully into the adult world of Powhatan life. She and her husband probably continued to live in her father’s capital, where she enjoyed her position as a favored daughter.⁶ She learned the arts of being a Powhatan wife and perhaps she even became a mother. On this latter point, the records remain silent. She never mentioned children

¹ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 141.

² Strachey, The Historie of Travaile, 54.

³ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 143.

⁴ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 86.

⁵ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 140.

⁶ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 143.

to the English, leaving historians to surmise that if she did undergo pregnancy, it probably ended in miscarriage, stillbirth, or infant death.¹

For three years, Pocahontas lived removed from the English, surrounded by the culture and traditions of her people. These years of early adolescence were undoubtedly crucial in her development of self-identity. She was a Powhatan woman, a Powhatan wife, a Powhatan daughter. Her family was Powhatan. Her friends were Powhatan. She processed and prepared Powhatan food and lived in a Powhatan longhouse. She participated in Powhatan dances and learned Powhatan songs. She watched Powhatan babies being born and she saw Powhatan elders die. Fully emerged in the life-ways of her people, she would have developed a sense of self, of Powhatan self, that could not easily be extinguished.

KIDNAPPING AN “INDIAN PRINCESS”

In 1613, however, Pocahontas’s world was to change forever. She was now a woman of sixteen or seventeen years old and was once again working as her father’s emissary and ambassador. On his behalf, she made a voyage to Patawomecks to extract tribute from this subordinate chiefdom as was customary within the Powhatan Empire. She may also have had friends among the Patawomecks; perhaps her husband’s family lived there. The colonist Ralph Hamor later reported that she “took some pleasure...to be among her friends at Patawomeke...to exchange some of her father’s commodities for theirs.”² Her peaceful voyage was not to last. The English captain Samuel Argall happened to come to the

¹ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 87.

² Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 225.

Patawomeck village on a trading expedition at that time and hearing of her presence, he resolved to “procure her captive.”¹

Samuel Argall had an ally among the Patawomecks. A man named Iapazeus was not only a trading partner, but “an old friend and adopted brother of his.”² Argall exploited his relationship with Iapazeus to demand that the Patawomeck man help him capture Pocahontas: “If he did not betray Pokohuntis unto my hands, wee would no longer be brothers nor friends.”³ Iapazeus was placed in the difficult position of either risking English hostility or Powhatan’s anger. After consulting with his older brother, who was the major werowance among the Patawomecks, Iapazeus finally agreed to the plot. Assuring his Indian allies that he would “use her courteously,” Argall instructed Iapazeus to bring Pocahontas aboard his ship.

Iapazeus could not accomplish the task alone. Although Pocahontas was perhaps “desirous to renew her familiarity with the English,” she was also savvy enough to know that she risked capture.⁴ Only after Iapazeus’s wife feigned “a great and longing desire to go aboard and see the ship” and produced “counterfeit tears” when her husband refused, did Pocahontas finally agree to accompany the woman onto the English vessel.⁵ After being welcomed with a cheerful supper, the Indians were invited to spend the night onboard the ship. Pocahontas perhaps began to grow suspicious of the Englishmen’s intentions at this time, for the next morning “being most possessed with fear, and desire of return, was first up.”⁶ Only then was the terrible plot revealed to her. Iapazeus and his wife were permitted to return to shore, but Argall “would reserve Pocahontas” because her father “had then eight of

¹ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 225.

² Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 225.

³ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 102.

⁴ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 225.

⁵ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 225.

⁶ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 226.

our Englishmen, many swords, pieces, and other tools...[which] he would not redeliver.”¹

Pocahontas was to be held for ransom and upon hearing this dreadful news “she began to be exceeding pensive, and discontented.”² One can only imagine the depth of her feelings of betrayal, anger, fear, and despair.

Soon after her capture, the English sent a message to Powhatan laying out the terms of ransom. As Ralph Hamor noted, “The news was unwelcome, and troublesome unto him, partly for the love he bore to his daughter, and partly for the love he bore to our men his prisoners...and those swords, and pieces of ours.”³ Powhatan faced a dilemma not easily solved. On one hand, his daughter remained a captive among the foreigners and judging by the English’s previous treatment of Powhatan prisoners, she could face hardship or even death at their hands. On the other hand, the so-called English “prisoners” that lived among the Powhatans were probably runaways from Jamestown who had come to the Indians in times of desperation and starvation at the fort. Many had probably been adopted by the Powhatans and if they returned to the English they might expect severe punishment or execution. According to the laws of the colony at that time, “No man or woman (upon pain of death) shall run away from the colony to Powhatan, or any savage werowance else whatsoever.”⁴ Sir Thomas Dale, the marshal and deputy governor of the colony, enforced this policy with rigor: “some he appointed to be hanged, some burned, some to be broken upon the wheel, others to be staked and some to be shot to death.”⁵ Moreover, the few guns and swords held by the Powhatans were more important now than ever as the Jamestown colonists grew in numbers and

¹ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 226.

² Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 226.

³ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 227.

⁴ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 188.

⁵ Price, Love and Hate in Jamestown, 147.

increased their demands on the Powhatans. The English had even set up satellite towns, like Henrico, which was established in 1611, deep in Powhatan territory. Powhatan slowly weighed his options: “He could not, without long advice and deliberation with his council, resolve upon anything.”¹

Finally, three months after the English kidnapped Pocahontas, Powhatan sent a response to the foreigners. Ralph Hamor later recalled that “he returned us seven of our men, with each of them a musket unserviceable, and by them sent us word, that whensoever we pleased to deliver his daughter, he would give us, in satisfaction of his injuries done to us, and for the rest of our pieces broken and stolen from him, 500 bushels of corn, and be forever friends with us.”² The English refused to believe that Powhatan had given up all the English weapons his people had pilfered and they continued to deny Pocahontas her freedom. By then the English probably had other motivations for keeping the young Powhatan woman. Through indoctrinating her into the Christian faith and English lifestyles, they perhaps hoped Pocahontas would become a Virginian success story, proving to their countrymen in England that colonial endeavors were worthwhile and that the “savage” land and its people could be tamed.

A PRISONER AMONG THE ENGLISH

The English took Pocahontas first to Jamestown and then to Henrico. There she went to live in the house of Alexander Whitaker, a thirty-eight-year-old minister from Cambridge.³ Although she was treated with the respect befitting a Powhatan “princess,” the English also

¹ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 227.

² Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 227.

³ Price, *Love and Hate in Jamestown*, 152.

expected that she would adapt herself to their customs and to the proper behaviors and attitudes of a Christian lady. The few female colonists living in Virginia were given the task of dressing Pocahontas in English fashions. Rigid bodices, long skirts, and manifold layers of fabric would have replaced the simple deerskin apron worn by Powhatan women.¹ Moreover, for the first time in her life, Pocahontas found herself confined to a fort.² No longer could she collect food in the fields or forests, or visit relatives and friends in distant villages. The colonists provided servants to perform manual tasks for Pocahontas and they refused to let her out of their sight in case she tried to escape.

Reverend Whitaker made Pocahontas's education his personal task. Daily she received lessons in English and Christianity as he tried to mold her into his ideal of a Christian woman.³ The religious laws of the colony were very strict during that period: a blasphemer might expect "to have a bodkin [small dagger] thrust through his tongue" and those who did not attend the daily "divine service" might be whipped or "condemned to the galleys for six months."⁴ Whitaker and other reverends in the colony were expected to "duly preach every Sabbath day in the forenoon, and catechize in the afternoon, and weekly say the divine service, twice every day, and preach every Wednesday."⁵ As a resident of Henrico, Pocahontas would have had to follow these rigid rules and dutifully attend the sermons and services preached by her host.

For years, scholars have debated the effects this strict indoctrination had on the young woman. In the past, writers like Grace Steele Woodward argued that Pocahontas willingly

¹ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 160.

² Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 160.

³ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 111.

⁴ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 181.

⁵ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 182.

adapted herself to English ways: “In her willingness to learn English ways, English words, and English rituals, she revealed an extraordinary ability to move from a culture grounded in sacrifice and superstition into a culture that was by contrast enlightened and sophisticated.”¹

This Eurocentric take on Pocahontas has been repeated by some modern writers as well, although not in such brash terms. David A. Price, for instance, argues that Christianity “struck a resonant chord in her; she proved an eager student of the English faith.”² Helen C.

Rountree, however, offers a different take on Pocahontas’s adoption of English ways. For her, “a strict, even harsh, captivity can bring about an alignment of captive with captors (nowadays called the Stockholm syndrome), especially if the siege goes on for any length of time.”³ Pocahontas may have adapted to the culture of her captives, but only through the stress of being held hostage.

Interestingly, despite all the English attempts to convert her, Pocahontas resisted baptism for many months. Only after she had obtained permission to marry an Englishman and thereby broker peace between the English and the Powhatans, did she finally acquiesce to the colonists’ goal of making her Christian. This delayed response to Christianity suggests that Pocahontas may have continued to maintain her Native belief system and Powhatan cultural alliance despite what the English colonists liked to think. Like her father, Pocahontas may have been playing a delicate game of politics. Dangling before them the possibility that she would convert to their faith, she maintained a degree of control over the English.

Outwardly, she gave the foreigners what they wanted, showing a “desire to be taught and

¹ Woodward, *Pocahontas*, 159.

² Price, *Love and Hate in Jamestown*, 154.

³ Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 162.

instructed in the knowledge of God.”¹ Inwardly, she may have been biding her time and waiting for an opportunity to free herself from the confines of the English fort.

THROUGH MARRIAGE AND BAPTISM, POCAHONTAS NEGOTIATES PEACE

While Pocahontas remained a prisoner at Jamestown, she met a twenty-eight-year-old widower named John Rolfe.² Rolfe, a pious, earnest, and kind-hearted man, took an active interest in the young woman and may have helped her with her English lessons.³ She, a lonely girl denied access to friends and family, perhaps welcomed his friendship. Over the months, this friendship turned to something more. Rolfe later wrote of his feelings for Pocahontas: “my hearty and best thoughts are, and have a long time been so entangled, and enthralled in so intricate a labyrinth, that I was even awearied to unwind myself thereout.”⁴ Rolfe had fallen in love. Whether Pocahontas reciprocated this love is unknown. Undoubtedly, she felt at least a fondness for John Rolfe: later he would tell Sir Thomas Dale that she made a “great appearance of love” to him.⁵ However, Pocahontas may have harbored other motivations for encouraging Rolfe’s attentions. As a prisoner indefinitely held by the English, Pocahontas perhaps saw marriage to an Englishman as a way to gain the trust of the foreigners. By marrying Rolfe, the English might finally allow her to leave the confines of Henrico and to meet once again with her Powhatan friends and kinsmen. In addition, after spending time with the English and hearing of their plans for expanding the colony, Pocahontas may have felt it wise for her people to broker peace with the colonists rather than to continue with the

¹ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 237.

² Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 163.

³ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 114.

⁴ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 235.

⁵ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 237.

animosity and skirmishes so devastating to the Powhatans.¹ Traditionally, the Powhatans saw marriage as an effective tool of alliance-building; the marriage of Pocahontas's mother may have served such purposes. Drawing from her cultural traditions, Pocahontas weighed her options and waited for an appropriate moment to act.

As romance grew between Pocahontas and John Rolfe, the rest of the English colony was becoming impatient. Pocahontas's capture had not produced the results they desired and when Sir Thomas Dale took over the governorship of the colony in March, 1614, he prepared to move against Powhatan.² Taking Pocahontas with him, Dale and "a hundred and fifty men well appointed" sailed up the York River to meet with Powhatan and to demand that he ransom his daughter or fight.³ As they made their journey upriver, the colonists met with a group of Indians. Insults were exchanged and the Powhatans "let their arrows fly."⁴ In retaliation, the English soldiers swiftly "manned [their] boats, went ashore, and burned in that very place some forty houses, and of the things [they] found therein made freeboot and pillage, and...hurt and killed five or six of [the Powhatan] men."⁵ Pocahontas undoubtedly felt devastated as she watched the destruction of her people. This may have been the first time that she directly witnessed such an attack.

Messengers were sent to Powhatan, expressing the English's demands and warning of the destruction they would wreak if he did not comply. Powhatan replied solemnly that the "swords and pieces, so many as he had, should be brought the next day."⁶ The next day came and went without Powhatan's arrival: the mamanitowik perhaps hoped to buy more time to

¹ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 119.

² Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 122.

³ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 227.

⁴ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 228.

⁵ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 228.

⁶ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 229.

consult with his advisors and devise a plan of action. The English proceeded to sail further upstream until they finally came to another Powhatan settlement. The Indians of this town told the English “they were there ready to defend themselves,” but asked for more time to hear from Powhatan. In this village lived two of Pocahontas’s half-brothers. Meeting with her “they much rejoiced, and promised that they would undoubtedly persuade their father to redeem her, and to conclude a firm peace” with the English.¹ By then, however, Pocahontas had seen the destruction wrought by the English first-hand. Now was her time to move. Now was the time for her to create an alliance through bonds that would last longer than empty promises of friendship.

Speaking alone with her brothers, Pocahontas probably shared her plans for a peaceful alliance. Around the same time, Ralph Hamor delivered a message to Sir Thomas Dale written by John Rolfe. In his letter, Rolfe humbly asked for permission to marry the young Powhatan woman, “for the good of this plantation, for the honor of our country, for the glory of God, for [his] own salvation, and for the converting to the true knowledge of God and Jesus Christ, an unbelieving creature, namely Pocahontas.”² Undoubtedly taken aback at this sudden request, which changed the tone of his mission upriver, Dale soon saw the advantages of this alliance. To allay any residual concerns of the English about her allegiance or trustworthiness, Pocahontas declared “she would still dwell with the Englishmen, who loved her.”³ Dale consented to the marriage and soon after envoys were sent to Powhatan to receive his blessing of the union.

¹ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 230.

² Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 235.

³ Price, Love and Hate in Jamestown, 154.

Powhatan sent word that the marriage was “a thing acceptable to him.”¹ Pocahontas returned to Henrico with the colonists and a few days later Reverend Whitaker baptized her into the Christian faith. Feeling safe in her alliance with the English, it was at this point that she revealed her secret name of Matoaka.² The English also gave her a new name: Rebecca. For Whitaker and the other English, this name was fitting. In the Bible, Rebecca, the wife of Isaac, conceived “two nations” in her womb “and the one people shall be stronger than the other people; and the elder shall serve the younger.”³ For the colonists, this name and Pocahontas’s marriage served as symbols of their own growing dominance in Virginia.

A few days following her baptism, on April 5, 1614, Pocahontas and John Rolfe were married. Nothing from the records of their union mentions anything of Kocoum, Pocahontas’s Powhatan husband. Perhaps he died during one of the many skirmishes with the English, or succumbed to a newly-introduced European disease. Equally plausible is that the couple’s separation during her captivity qualified as a Powhatan divorce. According to English definitions of marriage, Pocahontas’s union with Kocoum would have held no official standing in any case. The colonists conveniently overlooked this earlier marriage as she and John Rolfe united as man and wife. Powhatan did not attend the wedding, not wishing to put himself in a position of vulnerability among the English. In his place he sent Opachisco, “an old uncle of hers...and two of his sons to see the marriage solemnized.”⁴ Through their union, sanctified by both English and Powhatans, Rolfe and Pocahontas created a peace between their warring people. The colonist Ralph Hamor soon after rejoiced, “ever since we have had

¹ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 231.

² Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 127.

³ Faery, *Cartographies of Desire*, 84.

⁴ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 231.

friendly commerce and trade, not only with Powhatan himself, but also with his subjects round about us; so as now I see no reason why the colony should not thrive apace.”¹

LIFE AS “LADY REBECCA”

Soon after their marriage, Pocahontas and John Rolfe moved to Varnia, his small plantation directly across the river from Jamestown.² There John set about cultivating a strain of tobacco he had obtained in the Caribbean, while Pocahontas adjusted herself to the domestic life of an English wife. Although English women were traditionally expected to remain within the sphere of home and family, Pocahontas probably aided John in his outdoor endeavors with her agricultural knowledge and may have even kept a garden of her own. No longer a captive, Pocahontas undoubtedly also made visits to family and friends among the Powhatans.³ Some of her friends may even have come to live with her at Varnia: John became secretary of the colony and received a salary that permitted him to hire Indian “servants.”⁴ Although historians may never know what truly went on within the Rolfe household, by all appearances, Pocahontas was happy. Not long after the marriage, Ralph Hamor paid a visit to Powhatan and the mamanitowik “laughed heartily” to hear that his daughter was “so well content that she would not change her life to return and live with him.”⁵

¹ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 231.

² Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 128.

³ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 167.

⁴ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 131.

⁵ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 244.

VOYAGE TO A NEW WORLD

After about a year of marriage, Pocahontas gave birth to a son. The child's parents named him Thomas, no doubt in order to honor the colony's governor¹ Not longer after Thomas's birth, the Virginia Company invited the Rolfe family to make a trip to London on a promotional tour for the colony. The Rolfes agreed; perhaps Pocahontas was curious to see the English homeland of her husband. They sailed aboard the *Treasurer* in 1616, a ship captained by the same Samuel Argall who had taken Pocahontas captive three years earlier.² Pocahontas did not travel alone. In addition to her husband and child, ten or twelve Powhatan men and women also voyaged to England. Among this company were her half-sister, Matachanna, and her brother-in-law, Uttamatomakin. As well as being a kinsman through marriage, Uttamatomakin was also the spiritual advisor of Pocahontas's father. Powhatan had sent this priest along with his daughters on a fact-finding mission.³ Although peace now prevailed between the Powhatans and the English, the mamanitowik was clever enough to realize that this might not always be the case. He wanted to know what he was up against in England.

After a seven-week voyage across the Atlantic, the travelers finally disembarked at Plymouth on June 12, 1616. An English gentleman named John Chamberlain later wrote of their arrival: "Sir Thomas Dale is arrived from Virginia and brought with him some ten or twelve old and yonge of that countrie, among whom the most remarquable person is Pocahuntas (daughter of Pow-atan a kinge or Cacique of that countrie...married to one Rolfe an

¹ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 134.

² Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 135.

³ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 137.

English man).”¹ Probably overjoyed to be on firm ground once again, the Rolfes and their Powhatan companions made the remainder of their journey by coach. Years before, the Powhatan boy Namontack had journeyed to London directly by ship along the Thames River. He never saw the vast pastures and fields of the English countryside and had therefore told Powhatan that the English lacked farmland. By ensuring that Pocahontas and her entourage traveled through the country over land, the Virginia Company hoped to dispel this myth.²

Pocahontas arrived in London sometime in the early summer of 1616. She and her family were lodged at Bell Savage Inn, a well-known hotel on Ludgate Hill.³ This inn was somewhat of a cultural center in London: Christopher Marlowe staged several of his plays there and important English guests who came to visit Pocahontas over the next few months did not find it beneath them to spend their time in the inn.⁴ The Virginia Company financed Pocahontas’s stay at the Bell Savage, as John Smith later described: “the Treasurer and Company tooke order...for the maintenance of her.”⁵ She was given a stipend of four pounds a week and Sir Edwin Sandys, a member of Parliament with interests in the Virginia Company, took care of arrangements to make sure the Powhatan “princess” was well looked-after and entertained.⁶ In 1624, John Smith claimed that he had sent a personal letter of introduction to Queen Anne for Pocahontas, entreating King James I’s wife to well-receive her lest ill-treatment turn “her present love to us and Christianitie...to such scorne and furie, as to divert all this good to the worst of evill.”⁷ However, this letter to the queen may have

¹ Woodward, *Pocahontas*, 175.

² Price, *Love and Hate in Jamestown*, 164.

³ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 139.

⁴ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 139.

⁵ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 67.

⁶ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 139.

⁷ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 71.

been another of Smith's infamous fabrications. By 1624, Queen Anne had died and King James was ailing: no one could dispute his claims.

Pocahontas would not have needed John Smith's introduction in any case. Sir Thomas Dale and his wife, as well as Lord and Lady de la Warr all took time and trouble to see that Pocahontas received a proper reception at court.¹ The ladies probably helped Pocahontas find suitable attire for such a visit, which may have prompted the Englishman Samuel Purchas to write, "Master Rolfe's wife did not only accustome herself to civilitie but carried herself as a Daughter of a king, and was accordingly respected not only by the great Virginia Company...but of divers particular persons of Honour."² Unfortunately no direct record survives of Pocahontas's presentation before the king and queen. Second-hand evidence comes only from John Smith, who later wrote, "I have heard [that] it pleased both the King and Queen's Majesty honourably to esteem her."³

Many people of honor also came to visit Pocahontas at the Bell Savage Inn. Sir Walter Raleigh, famed explorer and founder of the Roanoke colony, met with her there and later took her with him to the Tower of London to meet his friend, the Earl of Northumberland.⁴ The poet and dramatist Ben Jonson also reportedly paid Pocahontas a visit. During his stay he was so intrigued with the foreign lady that he questioned her quickly for a few minutes and then spent the rest of an hour simply staring at her.⁵ Pocahontas finally withdrew from the room,

¹ Woodward, Pocahontas, 177.

² Woodward, Pocahontas, 178.

³ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 178.

⁴ Woodward, Pocahontas, 179.

⁵ Woodward, Pocahontas, 179.

perhaps embarrassed by Jonson's rudeness. The dramatist later mentioned her in a scene in his 1626 play, *The Staple of News*.¹

Pocahontas and her Powhatan companions also received frequent visits from Samuel Purchas. Purchas, a minister, had made it his mission to collect testimonies from any colonist returning from Jamestown.² He was especially interested in meeting with the Powhatan priest, Uttamatomakin, to learn about his Native beliefs and to try to convert him. Purchas later wrote, "I have both seen him sing and dance his diabolicall measures, and heard him discourse of his Countrey and Religion."³ He was disappointed, however, that Uttamatomakin refused to accept Christianity: the Powhatan priest told Purchas he could try to evangelize the younger Powhatans, but that he himself was "too old" to change his beliefs.⁴

For entertainment, Pocahontas undoubtedly attended theater presentations. William Shakespeare's plays were popular at the time, and she may have been curious to see *The Tempest*. Shakespeare based this work partly on events experienced by her own husband: on his crossing to Virginia, John's ship, the *Sea Venture*, wrecked off the coast of Bermuda during a storm. Several months later, the colonists onboard managed to make their way to Virginia. One of these individuals, William Strachey, was a shareholder in an English theater company and he may have relayed his experiences to the renowned playwright directly.⁵ In addition to plays, Pocahontas probably also participated in English celebrations like Bonfire Night on November 5th and Queen Elizabeth's Accession Day on November 17th. She certainly attended at least one court masque. John Chamberlain later wrote that at the annual

¹ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 134.

² Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 141.

³ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 142.

⁴ Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 179.

⁵ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 168.

Twelfth Night masque of January, 1617, “the Virginian woman Pocahontas, with her father counselor, have been with the King and graciously used; both were well placed at the mask.”¹

After spending a busy summer and fall in bustling London, with its crowded streets of more than 200,000 people, Pocahontas and her family elected to move to a more quiet environment as they waited for the winds that would take them back to Virginia. With the help of former Jamestown colonist George Percy, they found lodging in the rural community of Brentford, nine miles up the Thames.² While they waited in this more peaceful setting, Pocahontas had her portrait engraved by Simon van de Passe, a young Dutch artist.³ Although John Chamberlain would later insult both the portrait and its subject by calling Pocahontas “no fayre Lady,” this engraving remains as one of the best surviving records of Pocahontas’s stay in England.⁴

During the months that they waited for the winds to change, Pocahontas, her husband, and her son may also have taken a brief trip to Heacham, the Rolfe Family’s ancestral home.⁵ Kinship ties were important to Pocahontas as a Powhatan woman, so it is unsurprising that she would wish to meet her husband’s relatives. Unfortunately, nothing is recorded of how she and her child were received by the family; however, presumably the reception was favorable for only a few short months later they willingly took in Thomas following the death of his mother.

Back at Brentford, John Smith finally paid Pocahontas a visit. He had left Jamestown nearly eight years earlier and the Powhatans had long-since been told by the English that he

¹ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 178.

² Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 180.

³ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 180.

⁴ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 148.

⁵ Woodward, Pocahontas, 181.

had died. Powhatan, little trusting the words of the English, told Uttamatomakin to seek out his old ally in England. As Pocahontas told Smith during his visit, “They did tell us always you were dead, and I knew no other till I came to Plimoth; yet Powhatan did command Uttamatomakkin to seeke you, and know the truth, because your counciemen will lie much.”¹ Pocahontas was upset by Smith’s visit, first turning her face away from him and refusing to speak. Perhaps she was angry with Smith for his failure to live up to his obligations to her people and for the many raids he had conducted against the Powhatans. Finally, however, she forced herself to address him, saying, “You did promise Powhatan what was yours should bee his, and he the like to you; you called him father being in his land a stranger, and by the same reason so must I doe you.”² Reminding Smith of his old alliance with her people, she showed him that even though he may have forgotten his obligations to the Powhatans, she would continue to honor the promises of her people. Smith protested that as Powhatan royalty she should not call him “father,” but “with a well set countenance” she declared, “Were you not afraid to come into my fathers Countrie, and caused feare in him and all his people (but mee) and feare you here I should call you father; I tell you then I will, and you shall call mee childe, and so I will bee for ever and ever your Councieman.”³ This was Pocahontas at her strongest. Refusing to allow Smith to deny the relationship he created with the Powhatans, she forcefully renewed the alliance first fashioned by her father. Just as Powhatan had made John Smith a “son” and promised to share his land with the English, so now did Pocahontas make herself Smith’s “daughter,” implying that he had continued obligations to her and her people.

¹ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 72.

² Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 72.

³ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 72.

In this discussion with Smith, Pocahontas's words clearly illustrate that despite her long stay among the English, she had not lost sight of what it meant to be Powhatan.

THE DEATH OF POCAHONTAS

In early March, 1617, the winds finally changed and the Rolfe prepared to leave England. John Chamberlain wrote that the departure was “sorely against her will,” but it is difficult to surmise how Pocahontas truly felt about returning to her homeland.¹ The Powhatan woman probably had greater concerns on her mind: she, Thomas, and many of her Powhatan companions had become gravely ill. Unfamiliar English microbes had invaded their bodies, leaving them sick and afraid in a land far from the comforts of home. Uncertainty surrounds the diagnosis of their illness: perhaps they suffered from a respiratory infection like tuberculosis or pneumonia. Anthropologist Helen C. Rountree offers another plausible explanation: shortly after the *George* arrived in Virginia, a disease known as the “bloody flux” broke out among colonists and Powhatans alike.² Pocahontas and her companions may have suffered from this “hemorrhagic form of dysentery” as their ship sailed down the River Thames.³

When the *George* reached Gravesend, a town downriver from London, Pocahontas was too ill to continue. She was taken to shore and transported to an inn. The records do not say whether she received English medical treatment, but soon afterwards “it pleased God at Gravesend to take this young Lady to his mercie.”⁴ Purportedly, her final words were of her

¹ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 179.

² Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 184.

³ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 184.

⁴ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 193.

son: “All must Die. ‘Tis enough that the child liveth.”¹ Pocahontas was buried the same day as she died, on March 21, 1617. Her husband and friends did not have much time to mourn her, for they quickly had to prepare to set sail before the weather changed. Her son, too ill to travel, “was left at Plimoth” with his paternal uncle.² Thomas did not return to the land of his birth for nearly twenty years.³

In Virginia, Pocahontas’s death also marked the beginning of the demise of the peace her marriage had created. English tobacco plantations sprung up throughout the colony, pushing the Powhatans out of the fertile lands they had once used to grow their corn. Increasing numbers of colonists poured into Pocahontas’s homeland, making demands on the Powhatans for land and labor. Zealous English Christians tried to force Powhatan parents to give up their children so that they could be brought up in English culture and religion among the colonists.⁴ Powhatan died in 1618, and his brother Opechancanough did his best to hold together the faltering Empire. He led massive Powhatan attacks against the English, first in 1622 and again in 1644. However, the English continued to pour over from across the Atlantic and finally Opechancanough was captured and killed. Powhatan and Pocahontas’s goal of creating a lasting alliance between the Natives and newcomers had failed.

Pocahontas was barely twenty-one years old when she met her tragic end in a small English port. However, during the course of her short life she had experienced much. Growing up as a Powhatan, she learned the cultural teachings of her people and she used this knowledge to help build an alliance with the Englishmen in her land. During her final months in England, she would have used those same cultural perspectives and outlooks to make sense

¹ Woodward, Pocahontas, 185.

² Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 193.

³ Woodward, Pocahontas, 190.

⁴ Axtell, Natives and Newcomers, 253.

of the new world she encountered in Europe. Scholars have traditionally focused on her life in Virginia, yet her life in England also deserves attention. Pocahontas's voyage across the Atlantic gave her the opportunity to become fully immersed in a new culture. Her final months of life were spent trying to make sense of this strange new world. How would she have interpreted seventeenth-century London? What did she see? How did she feel? How can we know? These intriguing questions are examined in the following chapters.

Part Two

Interpreting a New World

Chapter Three

Powerful Flames and Enemy Destruction:

Pocahontas at the Gunpowder Plot Celebration

The lapping flames of the room's small fire cast flickering shadows on the bare walls. Outside, the November night was cold and dark and a light rain drizzled against the glass panes of the window. Matoaka wrapped her shawl more tightly around her shoulders, drawing what warmth she could from the fire. Cradled in her arms slept a small child, his tiny hands curled around his mother's fingers. On the other side of the hearth sat her half-sister, Matachanna. She was softly singing one of the songs of their homeland as she smoothed the folds of her woolen, English skirt.

"I think Thomas is asleep," Matoaka said, speaking in the language of her people. She rose gently from her chair, not wanting to wake the little boy. Matachanna rose, too.

"He is a fine child, sister. One day he shall be a great warrior."

Matoaka shrugged slightly, feeling a prick in her eyes.

"It is difficult to know what the future holds for him or for any of us."

Matoaka softly tucked her son into his bed, gently pushing his dark hair away from his face. He stirred for a moment, but then lay quietly.

"What is that?" exclaimed Matachanna. She stood by the window, looking out of its small, rectangular panes. The beads of rain caught on the glass reflected golden torchlight. In the distance voices could be heard—laughter, singing, shouts. Matoaka quickly stepped beside her sister, peering out into the dark night.

“It is a celebration. This morning the reverend spoke of it in church.”

“A celebration? For what?”

“He said that many years ago the English king was rescued from destruction on this night. John told me that every Taquitock, the time they call ‘autumn,’ the English celebrate this deliverance with fire.”

“I should go and get the others. Uttamatomakin would wish to see this.”

Matachanna opened the door to the hallway and went quickly to the room shared by the other Powhatans. Soon after she left, Matoaka heard a knocking at the door.

“Rebecca, my love?”

John entered the room, holding his hat in his hands and smiling.

“Would you like to come down and see the bonfire?”

Matoaka nodded.

Outside the drizzling rain dripped down on Matoaka’s face, catching tiny water droplets in her eyelashes. John stood at her side, holding her elbow as though to keep her from falling. She glanced back at the inn, looking to the small window of her bedchamber.

“It’s alright,” John said, “I’ve sent one of the servant women to sit with Thomas.”

Matoaka looked around her. Everywhere there were men and women holding torches, laughing, and singing. They were making a procession towards a central gathering place. Matoaka could see the glow of a large fire rising up into the night sky, yellow embers dancing skyward like reversed shooting stars. She and John joined the crowds, a sea of anonymous faces bathed in shadows and torchlight.

They came to the bonfire and Matoaka felt the heat of its burning flames against her cheeks. Warmth crept to her core and suddenly she felt herself transported back to her

homeland. Amid the shouts and songs of the English, Matoaka could almost hear the chants of the Powhatans, the stomping of feet, the trilling of voices. She looked around her and caught Matachanna's eye. She knew that her sister could feel it too. A sense of power surged through Matoaka. The fire's heat gave her strength.

Suddenly the voices of the English grew more violent. Insults were shouted and curses were uttered. Two men appeared in the crowd, carrying something large impaled on two wooden poles. Matoaka looked upwards and saw that what they carried appeared to be the figure of a man. His arms flapped as the two men jostled him between them. Astonished, Matoaka turned to John.

"Do not worry yourself. It is only an effigy. Look, he is stuffed with straw."

Matoaka looked again. The straw figure bobbed up and down on its poles. Then, with a sudden vehemence, the two men shoved it into the fire.

"Down with the papists! Down with enemies of England!"

"Burn the anti-Christ! Burn Pope Paul, that devil in disguise!"

The straw man began to catch in the burning flames. His arms took light, and wisps of straw rose upwards, turning yellow, orange, and finally black. A hissing noise emitted from the fire: the dampness of the straw meeting the heat of the flames. Matoaka's countenance changed. Different memories crept into her mind. The shrieks of enemy warriors and the wails of English soldiers echoed in her head. She saw in the flames of the fire the faces of men that she had watched die. I think I understand, now. She thought. This is about destroying their enemies. It is about restoring balance. Matoaka looked at the faces of the English around her. Excited, satisfied faces. They had restored power to their people and their land; power

that this Gunpowder Plot had tried to take from them. Matoaka smiled. Perhaps the English were not so foreign after all.

During the many months that Pocahontas spent in the new world of England, she saw and participated in numerous English customs, traditions, and festivities. Although the English may have tried to teach her the significance that these events held for them, Pocahontas would also have made her own interpretations and reached her own conclusions about these occurrences. One celebration that Pocahontas would surely have attended was the annual commemoration of the English king's deliverance from the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. Although no records speak directly of Pocahontas participating in this festivity, the English celebration of Bonfire Night on November fifth was not only widespread but was in fact mandated by English law. Throughout the nation, Englishmen and women rejoiced on this day by ringing church bells, feasting, lighting bonfires, setting off fireworks and gunpowder, and by burning effigies of the pope. Especially in London, the home of the king and of the city where this terrible plot would have taken place, bonfires lit up the crowded streets and people flocked together to celebrate victory and unity and to brighten up a cold November night.

Barring an illness or some other unusual circumstance, Pocahontas would have undoubtedly witnessed these acts of celebration and may have even participated in them along with her husband and his English friends. It is one thing, however, to observe what she did and saw and quite another to ask how she would have made sense out of these new experiences. Drawing on ethnohistorical methods, this chapter explores how Pocahontas might have encountered the revelry and rich symbolism of the Gunpowder Plot celebration—

the comparisons she might have drawn between the English use of fire, effigy-burning, and feasts and her people's own.

THE GUNPOWDER PLOT

Nearly twelve years before Pocahontas ever stepped foot in England, the subjects of that nation reeled from the discovery of a plot that would have thrown the realm into a state of political chaos and civil war. James I, who had inherited the throne only two years before, in 1603, would have met his end in this plot, along with his wife, children, and members of his parliament. However, through a fortunate and fortuitous discovery, the plot was averted and England was saved. Many English saw this deliverance as a show of God's favor bestowed on their nation.

The Gunpowder Plot began to be formulated nearly as soon as James took the English crown. Catholics in England, unhappy that yet another Protestant monarch held power over them, began to consider ways to dispose of the new king. A gentleman by the name of Robert Catesby took this task seriously, discussing assassination plans with his fellow Catholic, Thomas Percy, as early as 1603. Soon more Catholics were persuaded to join in the plot, including Thomas Winter, John Wright, and Guy Fawkes; eventually thirteen conspirators would be implicated. These men made elaborate plans to destroy the Protestant-run government with one fell swoop: not only would they take out the king and his heirs, but they would also destroy parliament with an enormous gunpowder explosion. They hoped that by

kidnapping the king's one surviving child, Elizabeth, they could take control in the power void that would follow, reinstituting Catholicism as England's official religion.¹

In 1604, the conspirators took the first steps to put their plan into action. Thomas Percy was promoted to the position of a Gentleman Pensioner by his friend and relative, the Earl of Northumberland, giving him an excuse to move to London.² Taking a house that backed onto the Parliament building, Percy and his fellow plotters began digging a tunnel that would take them directly beneath the seat of the king and his government.³ This back-breaking task was made easier a few months later when the conspirators realized that the adjacent house already had a cellar under the Parliament building. Quickly renting that house too, the plotters moved over twenty barrels of gunpowder into their tunnels and waited for the moment to strike.⁴

The trap was set and the conspirators may have succeeded, except that one of their members had a brother-in-law in parliament. Francis Tresham wrote a letter to William Parker, Lord Monteagle, warning him not to go to parliament on the day of November fifth, 1605:

My Lord out of the love I bear to some of your friends I have a care of your preservation. Therefore I would advise you as you tender your life to devise some excuse to shift off your attendance at this Parliament, for God and man hath concurred to punish the wickedness of this time...for though there be no appearance of any stir yet I say they shall receive a terrible blow this parliament.⁵

Realizing that the letter spoke of treason, Lord Monteagle showed it to other parliament members and finally to the king. A search was sent out on the night of the fourth and finally

¹ Alan Stewart, The Cradle King: The Life of James VI & I, the First Monarch of a United Great Britain, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 219.

² James Sharpe, Remember, Remember: A Cultural History of Guy Fawkes Day, (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 53.

³ Stewart, The Cradle King, 219.

⁴ Stewart, The Cradle King, 219.

⁵ Sharpe, Remember, Remember, 58.

the plot was uncovered in its entirety. An English Jesuit named Oswald Tesimond later wrote of the discovery:

Parliament was due to begin on Tuesday, 5 November. On the Monday night preceding, Sir Thomas Knyvett, a gentleman of the king's household, was sent to search the lower rooms and cellars beneath the actual chamber where Parliament met... Their first find was a small barrel of gunpowder, and after that a number of barrels arranged in order to the number of thirty-six, large and small.¹

Guy Fawkes, one of the conspirators, was captured at the scene of the crime and under torture revealed the identity of his co-plotters.² The other men were hunted down by the king's men: those who were not killed outright met an excruciating end during a public execution a few months later.³

King James I used the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot to his advantage. Many Englishmen had been unsure of his accession to the English throne, partly because he was already the monarch of Scotland and partly because some suspected him of Catholic sympathies. However, by exploiting the attempted treason, James rallied the English behind both him and his rule. Soon after the plot, James wrote a tract entitled "A Discourse of the Manner of the Discovery of this Late Intended Treason." This work not only portrayed James as the sole person who understood the treachery implied in Tresham's letter, but it also suggested that by uncovering the plot the king saved the entire nation from the clutches of Catholicism.⁴ To ensure that his English subjects did not soon forget their deliverance, "An Act for a Public Thanksgiving to Almighty God every Year on the Fifth Day of November" was passed in parliament, commanding every English parish to give an annual service

¹ Sharpe, *Remember, Remember*, 5.

² Sharpe, *Remember, Remember*, 62.

³ Sharpe, *Remember, Remember*, 73.

⁴ Stewart, *The Cradle King*, 223.

dedicated to remembering the Plot.¹ By law, these services were compulsory for all of the king's subjects and the mandate remained in effect until the ceremony was finally taken out of the Anglican prayerbook in 1859.²

The English celebration of the failure of the Gunpowder Plot began in 1606. In addition to religious services, Englishmen and women also commemorated the event with bonfires, fireworks, and feasting. Church bells joyfully tolled and gunpowder bags were set aflame to the delight of English children and adults alike. Drinks were passed around and food was shared as the English celebrated their king's deliverance. Sometimes, villages came together to make effigies of the pope that they burned in the bonfires to symbolize victory over the Catholic conspirators. The day became a crucial event on the emerging Protestant calendar, replacing the Catholic holiday of All Soul's Day and helping to create a new English Protestant identity.³ By joining Englishmen and women from every class together in a day of thanksgiving and revelry, the Gunpowder Plot celebration helped to unite the English together as a nation behind their monarch, King James.

Such plots and the intricacies of establishing and maintaining power would not have been unfamiliar to Pocahontas. Her own father, Powhatan, had to constantly be aware of threats to his rule in order to ensure that the empire he had created did not crumble. For example, the Jamestown colonists reported that the Chesapeake, a group of Algonquians who lived along the Elizabeth River, incurred the wrath of Powhatan when they refused to become part of his confederacy. When Powhatan's priests warned that "from the Chesapeake Bay a nation should arise which should dissolve and give end to his empire," Powhatan wasted no

¹ Sharpe, *Remember, Remember*, 79.

² Sharpe, *Remember, Remember*, 79.

³ David Cressy, *The Protestant Calendar and the Vocabulary of Celebration in Early Modern England*, *The Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 1 (Jan., 1990), 32.

time in destroying the Chesapeake community and killing its werowance.¹ However, the parallels that Pocahontas might have drawn with the Gunpowder Plot would have gone far beyond the event itself. The performance and ritual aspects of the English celebration would have seemed at once strange and yet familiar. As she witnessed the events from her Powhatan perspective, what might have Pocahontas made of these festivities?

JOYFUL FEASTING

In the late fall of 1616, Pocahontas would have attended church with her husband and learned about the event that had nearly shattered England a few years earlier. Following the church service that informed her of the plot, Pocahontas may have attended a feast with her husband. Feasting was one traditional way that the English celebrated their deliverance: in Canterbury in 1610, aldermen and officials treated themselves and their wives to an elaborate dinner that included wine and musicians.² In the following years, many Englishmen used the day as an opportunity to get drunk, taking advantage of the alcohol provided for the populace by both civic and parish officials.

From Pocahontas's perspective, feasting was an entirely suitable way of celebrating. Among the Powhatans, feasts were also used to mark important events. Powhatan weddings were celebrated "with much mirth and feasting"³ and whenever the English visited the Indians on peaceful missions, they were welcomed with elaborate meals and seemingly endless supplies of food: "wee were never more merrie, nor fedde on more plenty of good

¹ Rountree, Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough, 45-46.

² Cressy, The Protestant Calendar, 42.

³ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 140.

oysters, fish, flesh, wild foule, and good bread.”¹ Although the Powhatans did not have alcohol indigenously, when it was brought to them by the English they included it in their most special celebrations. When Ralph Hamor visited Powhatan on a diplomatic mission in 1614, he reported that the mamanitowik “caused to be fetched a great glass of sack, some three quarts or better, which Captain Newport had given him six or seven years since, carefully preserved by him, not much above a pint in all this time spent, and gave each of [the visiting English] in a great oyster shell some three spoonfuls.”² Pocahontas may have been surprised to see how much alcohol the English consumed in their celebration, but the idea of using alcohol to mark an important event would not have been entirely new.

Pocahontas would also have appreciated that food and drink were provided to the populace on Bonfire Night. Among the Powhatans, leftovers from the feasts of werowances were distributed among poorer people so that everything was consumed and nothing wasted.³ As Ralph Hamor noted, English guests provided with Powhatan food “eat some few, and disposed the rest to many of [Powhatan’s] hungry guard.”⁴ For the Powhatans, feasting was a way to show generosity and wealth. Through redistributing food at feasts, Powhatan reaffirmed alliances and created unity among his people. Pocahontas may have viewed the feasting done by the English on November fifth as serving a similar purpose. Joined together with food and drink, the English were reminded of their unity and of their loyalty to their king.

¹ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 172.

² Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 247.

³ Helen C. Rountree, The Powhatan Indians of Virginia: Their Traditional Culture, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 55.

⁴ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 247.

THE POWER OF FLAMES

After enjoying an English feast of food and drink, Pocahontas may have gone outside to see the English light their bonfires. Bonfires were a traditional form of celebration for the English that dated back to the Celtic days of druidic fire festivals.¹ The use of fire in November was particularly significant for the English: not only did the Bonfire Night celebrations brighten the gloom of early winter, but they also provided a Protestant alternative to Catholic traditions, which in turn had replaced pre-Christian solstice ceremonies. English Protestants associated fire with “expulsion to hell, and surrender to diabolic enemies.”² By burning bonfires, the English reminded themselves of Protestant martyrs who had burned in Catholic flames under Mary I, but also that they had triumphed over the Catholics that had planned to kill their new, Protestant monarch.³ The flames had a cleansing and regenerative effect for the English; an effect that Pocahontas might have understood as having a very spiritual dimension.

Fire, known to Pocahontas’s kinsmen as *pokatawer*, played an important role in the rituals of Powhatan daily and religious life.⁴ John Smith noted that the Powhatans appeared to worship “all things that are able to doe them hurt beyond their prevention,” including fire.⁵ Native American groups across North America revered fire for “its resemblance to living things, its creation of light, and its relationship to the sun.”⁶ Fire featured prominently in many Native American stories and rituals and many groups believed that the gift of fire was

¹ Cressy, The Protestant Calendar, 39.

² Cressy, The Protestant Calendar, 39.

³ Cressy, The Protestant Calendar, 39.

⁴ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 136.

⁵ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 149.

⁶ Sam D. Gill and Irene F. Sullivan, Dictionary of Native American Mythology, (Santa Barbara, C.A.: ABC-CLIO, 1992), 89.

bestowed upon humans by supernatural beings.¹ For the Powhatans, fire may have been seen as sacred for the dual role it played in their lives. On one hand, fire could be deadly: during the imprisonment of a Chickahominy individual at Jamestown, the poor man made a fire but “was so smothered with the smoake he had made, and so pittiously burnt, that [the English] found him dead.”² On the other hand, however, fire could bring life. The Powhatans used fire to clear new fields for farming, using slash and burn techniques.³ In addition, fire was used to attract fish to Powhatan canoes so that men could easily spear the creatures.⁴ Fire could also be used on hunting expeditions: Powhatan men would set fires in a large circle to surround herds of deer before they went in to dispatch their prey with a volley of arrows.⁵ As John Smith later described: “The Deere being thus feared by the fires, and their voices, they chase them so long within that circle, that many times they kill 6, 8, 10, or 15 at a hunting.”⁶ Fire brought the Powhatans the food they needed to survive and it also kept them comfortable in the winter, making their houses “as warme as stooves.”⁷ Despite its potential for danger, the Powhatans knew that fire allowed them to survive in their Virginian homelands.

In recognition of the important role that fire played in their lives, the Powhatans gave it a powerful spiritual position in their ceremonies. Powhatan women ensured that a fire was kept constantly burning in their houses, both to allow for the boiling of corn and the cooking of meat, and for ritualistic purposes.⁸ Before any meal, according to John Smith, “the better sort will take the first bit, and cast it in the fire, which is all the grace they are knowne to

¹ Gill, Dictionary of Native American Mythology, 89.

² Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 191.

³ Rountree, The Powhatan Indians of Virginia, 47.

⁴ Rountree, The Powhatan Indians of Virginia, 34.

⁵ Rountree, The Powhatan Indians of Virginia, 40.

⁶ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 144.

⁷ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 141.

⁸ Rountree, The Powhatan Indians of Virginia, 51.

use.”¹ This offering perhaps illustrates that the Powhatans believed that fire held a sacred connection to the spiritual world. Fire’s spiritual role was also seen in Powhatan temples: the priests who took care of these sacred Powhatan spaces had the duty of maintaining “a contynuall Fire” in the temple hearth.² In addition, fire played a part in Powhatan religious celebrations: “The manner of their devotion is, sometimes to make a great fire, in the house or fields, and all to sing and dance about it with Rattles and shouts together, foure or five heures.”³ For the Powhatans, fire was a critical element of religious life. Pocahontas, while viewing the English bonfires, undoubtedly felt a certain connection between the celebrations of the English and those of her own people. She perhaps saw the bonfires as a form of worship that connected the English to a spiritual world unattainable in the cold grey of English churches.

EXPLOSIVE DECLARATIONS OF DOMINANCE

The explosions of gunpowder and the dazzling flares of fireworks that accompanied the lighting of bonfires would have had a powerful affect on Pocahontas. The English learned to make and use these explosives from the Far East and by Elizabethan times fireworks had become a common feature in English celebrations. Parish churches provided the funds for fireworks and also for barrels of gunpowder that were set off to combat “the destructive horror of the gunpowder plot.”⁴ As Pocahontas watched and listened to the terrific explosions, she may have interpreted the blasts as being an aggressive show of English power. In her own experience, gunpowder had been used by the Jamestown colonists to intimidate her people.

¹ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 153.

² Rountree, *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia*, 134.

³ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 152.

⁴ Cressy, *The Protestant Calendar*, 41.

The English had employed their technological advantages to proclaim dominance in Virginia and to frighten and confuse Native men and women who had little experience with European weapons.

Gunpowder was not indigenous to the North American continent. When the English arrived in Virginia in 1607, the Powhatans had only limited knowledge of this powder's power; knowledge they had gained during earlier destructive intrusions into their land made by the Spanish. However, the Powhatans were quick to realize gunpowder's potential. They witnessed its use in English guns and cannon explosions, and like fire, they recognized that it had a dual role of destructive and practical purpose. Gunpowder gave the English colonists an advantage in warfare that the Virginian Indians were eager to make their own. On numerous occasions they asked the English to trade them their weapons, or to demonstrate the power of their guns. The English continually refused these requests, fearing that if they taught the Powhatans to use this technology that they would no longer hold any power over them. The Powhatans were left with scant knowledge of how to properly employ gunpowder. John Smith later reported that during his capture among the Powhatans, they "brought him a bagge of gunpowder, which they carefully preserved till the next spring, to plant as they did their corne; because they would be acquainted with the nature of that seede."¹ With so little guidance from the English, the Powhatans could only apply their indigenous experiences with powder-like particles to the understanding of gunpowder: they concluded that it was a plant seed. When this impression proved untrue, gunpowder remained a mysterious and deadly force.

¹ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 64.

The English refused to give the Powhatans gunpowder in trade or to teach them its uses, so the Powhatans decided to take it by stealth. They hoped to experiment with the powder and to learn its secrets. However, sometimes such testing proved deadly:

Another ingenious Salvage of Powhatans, having gotten a great bag of Powder, and the back of an Armour, at Werowocomoco amongst a many of his companions, to show his extraordinary skill, he did dry it on the backe as he had seene the souldiers at James Towne. But he dryed it so long, they peeping over it to see his skill, it tooke fire, and blew him to death, and one or two more, and the rest so scorched, they had little pleasure to meddle any more with powder.¹

Frustrated by the colonists' refusal to share their knowledge of this powerful weapon, the Powhatans began to question the friendship professed by the English. Hostilities mounted and the pilfering of weapons continued: Pocahontas was taken captive in part because the English could not tolerate their "pieces" falling into Powhatan hands.

In addition to as a weapon of war, the English in Virginia also occasionally used gunpowder explosions in a celebratory capacity. However, the Powhatans' lack of experience with gunpowder turned even these positive uses into terrifying displays of English power. During a peaceful trip among the Kecoughtans, John Smith and his companions "fired a few rackets, which flying in the ayre so terrified the poore Salvages, they supposed nothing impossible [the English] attempted."² Recognizing the fear that their weapons inspired, the English used gunpowder to intimidate the Powhatans and to announce their dominance over them. At the mock coronation of Powhatan, the English sounded off "such a volley of shot, that the King start[ed] up in a horrible feare."³ The English may have used this terrifying explosion to nullify any honor Powhatan received during the ceremony: although he was crowned king of the Powhatans, the English ensured that he remained cowed by their martial

¹ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 191.

² Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 97.

³ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 169.

might. Pocahontas would have been well-aware of the fear that gunpowder had inspired in her own people. She may have seen its use in the Bonfire Night celebration as having a similar goal of intimidating English enemies and proclaiming English victory and dominance.

PROTESTANT EFFIGY DESTRUCTION

The enemy that the English hoped to vanquish with their gunpowder and fireworks would have become apparent if Pocahontas witnessed another element of the Bonfire Night celebration: the burning of popish effigies. By the mid-seventeenth century, the practice of throwing figures of Pope Paul V onto bonfire flames had become common practice. A parliamentary newspaper of 1644 proclaimed, “Tuesday the 5 of November was a day of thanksgiving, as first for our deliverance from the Powder Plot, and it was kept very solemnly; many guns went off, and many fine popish gods were burnt.”¹ This tradition grew out of English fear and hatred of their Catholic enemies, a fear that only intensified after King James’s son, Charles I, took a French Catholic princess as his wife in 1625.² The first surviving records of the burning of effigies on Bonfire Night date to the 1620s and they may have served as a Protestant English response to the marriage.³ During the reign of Charles I, the practice incurred the official displeasure of the new queen, Henrietta Maria, and in many areas those who continued to burn figures of the pope were “put into the black book” of the Archbishop of Canterbury.⁴ By burning figures of the pope, Protestant Englishmen and women expressed their hatred of the Catholics who had threatened their monarch and destroyed a symbol of what they saw as a Catholic idol.

¹ Cressy, *The Protestant Calendar*, 49.

² Cressy, *The Protestant Calendar*, 43.

³ Sharpe, *Remember, Remember*, 89.

⁴ Cressy, *The Protestant Calendar*, 43.

If Pocahontas observed an early example of English effigy burning, she may have felt a great deal of dismay and displeasure. Among the Powhatans, effigies were an important part of the community's spiritual life. Their principal god, *Okeus*, and other deities were all represented in the form of carved figures: "in their Temples they have his image evill favouredly carved, and then painted and adorned with chaines of copper, and beads, and covered with a skin."¹ According to the colonist Henry Spelman, such images were common in "every country" of the Powhatans and "unto their images they offer beads and copper if at any time they want rain or have too much."² For the Powhatans, these images were more than simple figures of their deities: they were actual embodiments of supernatural powers. Infused with spiritual power, these effigies were housed in great temples where they received the constant attention of Powhatan priests.³ Powhatan men and women both revered and feared these images: as they passed temples in their canoes they "solemnly cast come peece of copper, white [shell] beads or *Pocones* into the river, for feare their Oke should be offended and revenged of them."⁴ Although Pocahontas had supposedly converted to Christianity, her cultural upbringing taught her to respect and fear images of deities. The burning of popish effigies would have seemed unbelievably disrespectful and Pocahontas might even have wondered if the practice would incur supernatural wrath and retaliation.

By the time Pocahontas visited London she had already lived through many examples of English disrespect towards images of deities. The English considered the Powhatans heathen idolaters and did not hesitate to ransack Powhatan temples and steal the pearl and copper offerings placed before the gods. Recognizing the Powhatan reverence of their

¹ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 149.

² Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 138.

³ Rountree, *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia*, 134.

⁴ Rountree, *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia*, 133.

effigies, the English on occasion also took these figures hostage to use as bargaining chips. In 1607, John Smith recorded this practice in his account of a skirmish between the colonists and a group of Kecoughtans:

Sixtie of seaventie of them, some blacke, some red, some white, some party-coloured, came in a square order, singing and dauncing out of the woods, with their *Okee* (which was an Idoll made of skinnes, stuffed with mosse, all painted and hung with chaines and copper) borne before them: and in this manner being well armed, with Clubs, Targets, Bowes and Arrowes, they charged the English, that so kindly received them with their muskets loaden with Pistoll shot, that downe fell their God, and divers lay sprauling on the ground; the rest fled againe to the woods, and ere long sent one of their *Quiyoughkasoucks* to offer peace, and redeeme their *Okee*. Smith told them, if onely six of them would come unarmed and loade his boat, he would not only be their friend, but restore them their *Okee*.¹

English disrespect for Powhatan effigies undoubtedly deeply offended and angered Virginia's Natives. The relative impunity enjoyed by the English for their acts of desecration may also have led to feelings of spiritual crisis. According to the colonist William Strachey, a werowance named Pepiscumah refused to "forsake his falce gods," yet he "believed [the English] God as much exceedeth theirs, as [English] guns did their bowe and arrowes."² As Pocahontas watched the English burn Catholic figures, she may have felt sorrow and anger that English Protestants were once again asserting their religious superiority while disregarding and disrespecting the beliefs of others.

RESTORING BALANCE THROUGH TORTURE

The burning of popish effigies perhaps made Pocahontas consider another Powhatan tradition: the ritual torture and execution of enemies. Even if Pocahontas did not see the

¹ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 84.

² William Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile into Virginia Britannia: Expressing the Cosmographie and Comoditeis of the Country Together with the Manners and Customes of the People*, (London: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005), 97.

burning of effigies on that November evening, she would have had other reasons to connect the celebration of Bonfire Night to practices of torture. The story of the fate of the Gunpowder conspirators was a grisly tale of public torture and execution. Pocahontas may have learned about the traitors' punishment in the November-fifth church service, or perhaps even from one of the few surviving individuals implicated in the plot. During her stay in England, Pocahontas reportedly visited the Earl of Northumberland, a prisoner in the Tower of London.¹ She may have made this visit upon the request of Sir Walter Raleigh or upon the invitation of someone with whom she already shared a degree of familiarity: George Percy. George Percy, a former president of the Jamestown Colony, was the younger brother of Henry Percy, the ninth Earl of Northumberland.² Henry Percy had been implicated in the Gunpowder Plot after it was discovered that he had promoted his kinsman, Thomas Percy, to the position of Gentleman Pensioner, a life-guard of the king, without making him swear the Oath of Allegiance.³ This promotion gave Thomas Percy an excuse to move to London where he organized the final stages of the Gunpowder Plot. Although the Earl may not have played a deliberate part in this conspiracy, the king and his parliament were determined to find a noble mastermind behind the plot. Henry Percy was thrown into the Tower and his family was disgraced: this fall in favor perhaps factored into George Percy's decision to try his luck in Virginia.⁴ The opportunity to meet the noble brother of a man she had known in Jamestown may have interested Pocahontas: kinship relations were important to the Powhatans. She perhaps also found herself curious to see how the English treated their prisoners. If the Earl

¹ Woodward, *Pocahontas*, 179.

² Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 21.

³ Sharpe, *Remember, Remember*, 53.

⁴ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 21.

shared with her the fate of the other conspirators, she would have soon realized that his punishment was light by comparison.

In the months that followed the failed Gunpowder Plot, the conspirators were rounded up and brought to trial. England's Attorney General, Sir Edward Coke, led the prosecution and later presided over the executions of the convicted men.¹ The speech he made at the end of the trial was later reprinted and distributed around London: Pocahontas may even have seen a copy during her stay. In this speech, Coke described the gruesome deaths of the plotters:

...he shall be strangled, being hanged up by the neck between heaven and earth, as deemed unworthy of both or either: as likewise, that the eyes of men may behold, and their hearts condemn him. Then he is to be cut down alive, and to have his privy parts cut off and burnt before his face as being unworthily begotten, and unfit to leave any generation after him. His bowels and inlaid parts taken out and burnt, who inwardly had conceived and harbored in his heart such horrible treason. After, to have his head cut off, which had imagined the mischief. And lastly his body to be quartered, and the quarters set up in some high and eminent place, to the view and detestation of men, and to become a prey for the fowls of the air.²

For the English, the symbolism of each step of the execution served to highlight their disgust with both the plotters and with the crimes they had set out to commit. Every aspect of the criminals was condemned: their past, for they were "unworthily begotten," as well as their future. They were denied a place in the earthly world and a place in heaven: they were not even permitted a proper burial. All of this took place in a public forum. London spectators came from all around to hear the condemned make their final speeches and to watch with horrified fascination as they met their deaths. English officials may have used the public nature of the executions as a form of social control. The English populace witnessed the

¹ Sharpe, Remember, Remember, 70.

² Sharpe, Remember, Remember, 76.

punishment for treachery and was warned against contemplating similar acts lest they meet a comparable fate.

If Pocahontas heard of these English methods of torture and execution, she may have been reminded of practices of enemy destruction employed by her own people. The Algonquian-speaking peoples of coastal Virginia, like many Native groups, had ritualized traditions of enemy execution. The English colonists soon met with these practices as they ventured into Powhatan land. One of the first English victims was George Cassen, who was captured and killed during the same voyage that Opechancanough first took John Smith prisoner in 1607.¹ Over the years, other colonists also died during torture ceremonies. After months of raiding Native villages, John Radcliffe finally fell into a trap at Powhatan's capital. He with "about thirtie others as carelesse as himselfe, were all slaine."² John Smith later recorded the process involved in the ritualized torture and execution of these men:

When [Powhatan] would punish any notorious enemy or malefactor, he causeth him to be tyed to a tree, and with Mussell shells or reeds, the executioner cutteth off his joints one after another, even casting what they cut of into the fire; then doth he proceed with shells and reeds to case the skinne from his head and face; then doe they rip his belly and so burne him with the tree and all.³

Powhatan rituals of torture were typically reserved only for enemy captives. Criminals within the community faced other forms of punishment. According to Henry Spelman, murderers "were beaten with staves till their bones were broken, and being alive were flung into the fire."⁴ Individuals who committed capital offenses other than murder were "knocked on ye head" or, in other words, bludgeoned to death.⁵ The reservation of prolonged torture

¹ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 58.

² Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 129.

³ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 157.

⁴ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 143.

⁵ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 143.

ceremonies for foreign enemies suggests that it played a powerful community role that went beyond simple execution. In fact, Powhatan ritualized torture had a potent spiritual component.

Unfortunately, historians have not closely examined the symbolic significance of Powhatan rituals of torture. However, the traditions of the Iroquois, a northern neighbor of the Powhatans, have been carefully documented and analyzed. The historian Daniel K. Richter argues that torture among the Iroquois served the sacred purpose of restoring a community's collective spiritual power.¹ When friends or relatives were killed in battle or died from one of the strange new European diseases, the Iroquois looked outside of their communities to regain the loss of spiritual power that accompanied those deaths. Through "mourning wars" the Iroquois captured and then either adopted or ritually tortured enemies. These practices of "replacing" both the physical presence and spiritual power of deceased loved ones helped to assuage the grief of those left behind and strengthened the community as a whole.² As another Eastern Woodlands group, it seems probable that the Powhatans held similar beliefs about the sacred power of individuals and the need to replace that power if those individuals were lost to war or disease. The destructive raids of the English combined with the introduction of new illnesses may have prompted the Virginian Algonquians to attack their foreign adversaries and torture them to restore balance to Powhatan communities.

Torture among the Powhatans was either carried out by a male executioner or by women from the village.³ Women's role in the event may have been to make the experience

¹ Daniel K. Richter, "War and Culture: The Iroquois Experience," American Encounters: Natives and Newcomers from European Contact to Indian Removal, 1500-1850, edited by Peter C. Mancall and James H. Merrell, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 285

² Richter, "War and Culture," 286.

³ Rountree, The Powhatan Indians of Virginia, 84.

even more humiliating for the victim. Tied to a tree, the enemy captive was helpless to defend himself even from these non-warriors. If Iroquoian examples are any indication of the process, both the torturers and the other villagers would hurl insults at the captive, deriding and degrading him. In this way all members of the community participated in the defeat of their enemies, which promoted group cohesion and feelings of superiority over common foes.¹ Humiliation of victims was also a way to test enemies: if they ignored their pain, sang songs, and replied to their captor's comments with insults of their own, victims were considered "manly" and a worthy sacrifice for the dead friend or relative whose power they replaced.²

Pocahontas undoubtedly witnessed and may have even participated in ritualized torture of enemy captives. She lived with her father during the time that John Radcliffe was tortured and executed, and she may have shouted insults at the ambushed man along with her kinswomen to humiliate him and help restore her community's balance with the sacred. Thus, as Pocahontas learned about the public torture associated with the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, she perhaps interpreted the English actions as having a similar sacred and spiritual component. From her own perspective, the torture of the Catholic conspirators was a way for the English populace to restore spiritual balance to their community that the plot had threatened to overthrow.

¹ Richter, "War and Culture," 287.

² Tom Holm, "American Indian Warfare: The Cycles of Conflict and the Militarization of Native North America," *A Companion to American Indian History*, edited by Philip J. Deloria and Neal Salisbury, (Malden, M.A.: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 157.

PROTESTANT MARTYRS AND RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

In the same way that ritualized torture replaced power lost through deaths in the Powhatan community, Pocahontas may have seen the torture of the Gunpowder plotters and the annual burning of popish effigies as replacements for power the English lost when Protestants were burned at the stake under the rule of Mary I. Englishmen themselves linked these two events, viewing the flames of their celebratory bonfires as symbolic of the fires of Protestant martyrs.¹ As Pocahontas was indoctrinated into the Protestant faith over the years she spent with the English, she undoubtedly learned about these martyrs and about the cruel ways in which they were executed for their faith.

Mary I, eldest daughter of Henry VIII, had inherited the English throne under turbulent conditions in 1553. As a fervent Catholic, Mary hoped to reinstate her faith in a realm that had been officially Protestant since her father's break with the Catholic Church years earlier. As part of her religious zealotry, Mary ordered the deaths of Protestant heretics who refused to accept Catholicism. Two-hundred-and-thirty-seven men and fifty-two women met fiery fates before Mary's death in 1558, earning the queen the grisly nickname of "Bloody Mary."² In the years following her death, Protestants rejoiced to be rid of her persecution and reverently commemorated the martyrs who died in her Catholic flames.

In 1563, a man named John Foxe published a book entitled, *Actes and Monuments of Matters Most Speciall and Memorable*. This volume, which soon became known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, included vivid descriptions of the sufferings and deaths of the men and women who died under Mary's rule. The book was enormously popular in Protestant England and over the next two centuries it became one of the most read books in the English

¹ Cressy, *The Protestant Calendar*, 39.

² Sharpe, *Remember, Remember*, 9.

language.¹ It is quite likely that the Reverend Alexander Whitaker used this book to teach Pocahontas during her first year in Henrico. Even if she did not see the book among the English in Virginia, she surely saw it in England, because “it was ordered by the bishops to be placed in every cathedral church in England, where it was often found chained, as the Bible was in those days, to a lectern for the access of the people.”²

As Pocahontas learned the tales of the martyrs and examined the grisly engravings that accompanied the text, she certainly would have understood the English need to restore balance and sacred power to their nation. She probably found parts of the book quite troubling. Especially disturbing for Pocahontas would have been the images of women burning at the stake. In one passage, John Foxe lamented the deaths of Protestant women by declaring that “seldom in any country, for political controversy, have four women been led to execution, whose lives were irreproachable, and whom the pity of savages would have spared.”³ He did not know how close he was to the truth. Although within Pocahontas’s cultural background the torture of enemy men was accepted, women rarely, if ever, met this fate. The Powhatans, like many Native groups, waged warfare principally for revenge against rival groups and to take captives to replace lost spiritual power. When women and children were captured in these skirmishes and raids, they were usually treated with relative kindness and adopted into the Powhatan community.⁴ Foxe’s tales of Englishwomen meeting the same cruel fate as Englishmen would have shocked Pocahontas, but may also have reminded her of

¹ Sharpe, *Remember, Remember*, 10.

² John Fox, *Fox’s Book of Martyrs*, edited by William Byron Forbush, (Grand Rapids, M.I.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978). During his lifetime, John Foxe spelled his last name with an “e.” However, some modern editions of his work drop the “e” to give the name a more modern spelling.

³ Fox, *Fox’s Book of Martyrs*, 240.

⁴ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 106.

other instances of English cruelty towards women, such as when the Paspahegh queen was “put to the sword” by Jamestown’s colonists in 1610.¹

Another aspect of the *Book of Martyrs* and the Gunpowder Plot celebrations that would have troubled and even confused Pocahontas was the vehement hatred that Englishmen and women showed towards those of differing faiths. English intolerance of the religious beliefs of others may have been something that Pocahontas struggled with from the beginning of her confinement among the English. Among the Powhatans, religious beliefs and practices were held dearly; however, the Natives of Virginia accepted variance and variety in those beliefs. Pocahontas’s husband, John Rolfe, noted that the Powhatans were “very inconstant in all that they speake of their religion: one denying that which another affirmth.”² One reason for this variability was that the Powhatans practiced polytheism. With a number of gods to choose from, individual Powhatans could decide for themselves which deity to emphasize.³ Another possibility is that the Powhatans’ lack of a written religious text like the Christian Bible allowed them more fluidity and flexibility with their oral religious histories and traditions. In either case, the Powhatans were happy to allow for different interpretations of their spiritual beliefs and never considered murdering anyone for holding the “wrong” faith. John Smith later emphasized that the Powhatans “did not kill the English because they were Christians, but for their weapons and commodities.”⁴ Coming from this background of tolerance for spiritual differences and disagreements, Pocahontas would have found Europe’s religious wars and the insatiable hatred between English Protestants and Catholics both perplexing and unreasonable.

¹ Price, *Love and Hate in Jamestown*, 143.

² Rountree, *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia*, 137.

³ Rountree, *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia*, 137.

⁴ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 196.

The celebrations witnessed by Pocahontas on November fifth, 1616 may have just been a typical example of Bonfire Night joviality for the English. For the Powhatan woman, however, the day's activities held a myriad of new meanings. In the revelry of the evening, Pocahontas saw areas where her culture and that of the English overlapped. Fire, feasting, and restoring community balance through the torture and execution of enemies were familiar concepts to this Powhatan woman. These practices would have made sense from her Native cultural perspective and they would have helped her to understand the foreign customs and beliefs of the English. However, Pocahontas also discovered English practices and traditions that would have been unthinkable among her own people. The burning of effigies and the martyrdom of Englishwomen would have been very disturbing to Pocahontas and she may have struggled to understand the English's intolerance for different religious perspectives. Taking the insights she gained on that cold November night, she built upon her previous knowledge of the English to create a better understanding of these strange natives of the new world of England. In time, she would find that the simultaneity of the likenesses and differences illustrated by fire, feasting, and even ritual torture would become increasingly apparent in the comparison of other English and Powhatan activities. Not long after she warmed herself by the flames of the November-fifth bonfires, Pocahontas was invited to participate in another English tradition: the royal court masque.

Chapter Four

Dances of Welcome and Displays of Power:

Pocahontas at the Royal Twelfth Night Masque

Nervously Matoaka adjusted her overskirt once more: it was not every day that one met with so great a werowance. Touching her earlobes to ensure that the symbolic pearls of her homeland remained safely in place, she glanced over at Uttamatomakin. The priest stood tall and proud in his leather mantle, quietly defiant in his refusal to wear English garb. Matoaka took courage from his presence. As the daughter of the mamanitowik, she remembered her duty to boldly represent her people to the English court. Uttamatomakin gave her a small nod of encouragement and together they entered the grand hall.

Dazzling chandeliers of sparkling candles lit the crowded theater. Noblemen and women bustled about as they competed for the most prestigious seating. Now and again, someone would stop and cast curious stares at the Powhatan man and woman, whispering to other aristocrats behind laced handkerchiefs. After a few moments, a richly-dressed courtier came before them and with a slight bow conducted the Powhatans to their chairs.

“The good King James has certainly honored you and your companion, Lady Rebecca, by so well-placing you at the masque.”

“And where is his majesty?” Matoaka inquired, but the man had already turned away and disappeared into the crowd.

A hush gradually began to descend in the room as the courtiers took to their seats. Glancing around a final time, Matoaka and Uttamatomakin also sat and followed the

audience's gaze as it turned to the hall's central stage. Elaborate painted scenery depicted a street and a lavish building. Suddenly, a strange music began to play.

"Let us play and dance and sing,

"Let us now turn every sort

"Of the pleasures of the spring

"To the graces of a court."¹

Figures dressed in light, gauzy silk appeared on the stage, dancing delicately as the soft folds of their costumes flowed behind them. Matoaka peered more closely at the performers. They were dressed as women, but their forms betrayed them. Were these feminine dancers actually men?

"Uttamatomakin," Matoaka whispered, "I do not think that these men can be cowards—look no one in the crowd mocks them. They must be the two-spirited ones."

Matoaka watched in wonder as more figures appeared on the stage: some were dressed in bright fabrics with painted hands and faces, while others wore monstrous masks that disguised their features. She felt a growing excitement as the performers pranced in and out of circles in unison with the strange melodies of English music. Remembering the welcoming rituals of dance and song performed by her own people, she wondered if the English meant to honor their Powhatan guests in a comparable fashion.

One dancer stood out among the rest. This long-legged gentleman's swiftness of foot and grace of movement challenged the other performers to add vigor to their own steps. Every time the dancer passed, a red-bearded man sitting not far from the Powhatans clapped his hands and shouted words of delight.

¹ Ben Jonson, "The Vision of Delight," *The Works of Ben Jonson: Volume III*, (London: Adamant Media Corporation, 2005), 115.

“George Villiers dances particularly well tonight,” remarked a nobleman seated in front of Matoaka.

“Yes,” agreed the man’s English companion, “undoubtedly he wishes to thank the king for his promotion to earldom. Besides, the masque is dedicated to him, after all.”

Matoaka frowned slightly and then turned back to the performance. The dancers were singing again:

“’Tis he, ’tis he, and no power else,

“That makes all this what Phant’sie tells;

“The founts, the flowers, the birds, the bees,

“The herds, the flocks, the grass, the trees,

“Do all confess him; but most these

“Who call him lord of the four seas,

“King of the less and greater isles.”¹

All of the English aristocrats turned towards Matoaka’s side of the theater. At first she wondered if they were staring at her, but then she noticed the way that the red-bearded man responded to the gazes. With a self-important smile and a slight wave of the hand, he acknowledged the dancers’ praise.

“Uttamatomakin,” Matoaka quickly whispered, “I believe that man must be the English werowance.”

“Impossible!” the priest declared, “if he were the mamamitowik of this land he would have properly welcomed us with speeches and gifts.”

¹ Jonson, “The Vision of Delight,” 119.

Matoaka shrugged. She often felt that the more she learned of the English, the less she understood.

During the Christmas season of 1616 to 1617, Pocahontas and her father's counselor, Uttamatomakin, received an invitation to attend the annual Twelfth Night Masque at the Jacobean court. This event is one of the few well-documented experiences that Pocahontas had during her time in London. Not only did the courtier John Chamberlain comment that the Powhatans were "well-placed" at the masque, but John Smith also declared that it pleased the English king and queen to "honorably esteeme" Pocahontas "both publikely at the masks and otherwise."¹ The English king hoped to impress the young woman with elaborate courtly displays of English wealth and opulence. By attending the masque, Pocahontas had the opportunity to experience life in the royal English court. She saw the English monarch and his wife in their element, surrounded by courtiers who competed for their attention and favor. She also witnessed the English manner of performing. The royal masque, far grander than a simple play, was a sumptuous spectacle of elaborate costumes, scenery, music, and dance that lasted upwards of three hours.²

A dance, as the English well knew, could tell an audience a great deal about a people and their values. The records the English left, however, convey more about what Pocahontas and the other Powhatan delegates were meant to see and understand than what they actually saw. This chapter looks at dance from an ethnohistorical view, considering the masque as

¹ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 73.

² Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 146.

what anthropologists call a “performative practice.”¹ It is not only concerned with understanding the more readily apparent meanings that the English intended to convey about themselves through the Twelfth Night Masque, but—more elusively—how a people with a rich tradition of performative practice all of their own made sense of it.

The following pages explore how, drawing from her own cultural experiences, Pocahontas would have made comparisons between this English celebration and the dances of her own people. Possibly noticing areas where the traditions of the two cultures overlapped, Pocahontas may have been surprised to discover that many elements of the courtly performance contradicted the teachings of the more austere English colonists she had encountered in her homeland. As she gleaned insight into English attitudes towards gender, race, sexuality, social hierarchy, and power relations by watching the masque, she may have felt challenged to rethink the understanding of English that she had developed over the last few years. Viewing the event from her Powhatan perspective, Pocahontas formulated her own impressions and judgments of the English court’s displays of power and ceremonies of welcome. While she probably appreciated some elements of the performance, other parts may have confused or disappointed her. Using her unique interpretations of the Twelfth Night Masque, Pocahontas may have discerned contradictions between what seventeenth-century Englishmen said they valued and how they actually lived their lives.

THE POWER OF DANCE

Dance carried definite meanings for both the Powhatans and the English. The masque that Pocahontas attended on that cold winter’s night was *The Vision of Delight*, a spectacle

¹ An analysis of the intersection between ritual, performance, and bodily practice is Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

written and directed by the playwright Ben Jonson.¹ This performance anticipated the coming spring and attributed the New Year's beauty and glory to James, "king of the less and greater isles."² Unfortunately, although the text of this masque survives, little is known about its choreography or music. The script for the masque is a short six pages, yet based on records of other court performances the event probably lasted several hours.³ During this time parades of musicians, dancers, actors, and entertainers regaled the audience using elaborate scenery and fanciful costumes to create a magical and spectacular sight.⁴ For the Jacobean courtiers who participated in the masque, dancing provided a way to show off their elite skills and to win the favor of the king. Courtiers learned to dance from childhood and skill on the stage helped mark them as true aristocrats.⁵ Through dancing, English nobles participated in the courtly community and if they danced well they won the respect and admiration of their peers. From Pocahontas's perspective, the notion of dancing to confirm community identity would have seemed familiar. Dance played an essential role in Powhatan life by creating a sense of shared identity through physical expressions of community belonging and collective beliefs. In addition, the Powhatans also used dance to welcome others into alliances of friendship. Thus, as Pocahontas watched the English court masque, she may have attributed multiple meanings to the English performance.

Dance among the Powhatans was a regular activity used to promote group cohesion. Henry Spelman, a colonist who spent many months among the Powhatans, remarked that both men and women participated in this pastime, "hanging all in a round" and "stamping on ye

¹ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 146.

² Jonson, "The Vision of Delight," 119.

³ Jonson, "The Vision of Delight," 115-120.

⁴ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 146.

⁵ Clare McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage: Anna of Denmark and Female Masquing in the Stuart Court, 1590-1619*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 8.

ground.”¹ For the Powhatans, dance provided a way for community members to join together to celebrate their individual spirits as well as their common group identity. Powhatans expressed themselves with “many antic tricks and faces,” yet at the same time they acknowledged their individual dances as part of a larger group performance. George Percy noted these two levels of expression when he commented, “when they were in their dance they kept stroke with their feet just one with another, but with their hands, faces, and bodies, every one of them had a several gesture.”² Through dancing in circles and keeping a common beat they confirmed their group allegiance and actively participated in the maintenance of their cultural traditions.

In addition to the regular social dances that promoted group solidarity, Powhatans also danced to express their religious beliefs. John Smith noticed that Pocahontas’s kinsmen expressed their devotion by building a fire and dancing “about it with Rattles and shouts together, foure or five hours.”³ On other occasions, “they set a man in the midst, and about him they dance and sing, he all the while clapping his hands, as if he would keep time.”⁴ This man, who may have been a priest, perhaps helped focus the Powhatans’ energies by using special songs to call upon spiritual powers. By expressing their beliefs through public performance, the Powhatans conveyed a sense of shared outlook and worldview that also helped promote group cohesion and social continuity.

Powhatan dance symbolically linked community members through expressions of common identity and shared beliefs. Powhatans also used dance to welcome outsiders into their communities. Whenever the English colonists in Virginia visited a Native village, they

¹ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 147.

² Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 26.

³ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 152.

⁴ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 152.

were always greeted with spectacles of joyous music and dance: “After they had feasted us, they showed us, in welcome, their manner of dancing.”¹ Using rattles and cane pipes, the Powhatans made music for their guests and “would not thinck they had expressed their welcome sufficyentlie enough until they had shewed them a daunce.”² By dancing for strangers, the Powhatans demonstrated their cultural identity to the foreigners while simultaneously celebrating the possibility of creating new friendships and alliances that would expand their social networks. By showing the English their community performances, they allowed the colonists a glimpse into their social world and offered the newcomers the opportunity to join with the Powhatans in ties of mutual, reciprocal obligations. Pocahontas may have viewed the Twelfth Night masque in England as having similar purposes of expressing English identity and belief systems while offering welcome and friendship to the king’s Powhatan guests.

THE ANTIMASQUE

The Englishmen who encountered Native dances in Virginia did not always appreciate the levels of meaning conveyed in the performances they witnessed. Judging the dances by English standards of decorum, colonists compared the Powhatan performers to “so many wolves and devils,” suggesting that they made “such a terrible howling as would rather affright then give pleasure to any man.”³ In contrast, while Pocahontas was in London she might have considered the English manner of formal dancing far too tame and inexpressive. She may have been pleased, then, at the Twelfth Night celebration to see the performance of

¹ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 26.

² Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 80.

³ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 26; Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 79.

“antimasques.” For the English court, antimasque spectacles broke with the rules of courtly propriety by rejecting English ideals of dance.¹ Through “preposterous change and gesticulation” and “fantastic motions of their heads and bodies,” dancers in the antimasque created a sense of disorder and confusion.² This disruption of the courtly ideal of controlled, graceful movement created a conflict which was always resolved by the end of the masque with a decorous and orderly performance of the main dance.³

Antimaques provided comic relief to the spectators and gave courtiers the opportunity to express different dancing skills. Instructions in the script of *The Vision of Delight* call for two antimasques, one of which is described as “A She-monster delivered of six burratines that dance with six pantalones.”⁴ For the English, antimasques were not meant to be taken seriously; they were simply opportunities for the masque’s architects to experiment with elaborate pieces of scenery and fanciful, exotic costumes to dazzle the audiences and to break up the formality of the evening. Yet, for Pocahontas the antimasque may have been the most intriguing performance of all. Knowing that the dances of her own people, however “wild” they might have appeared to the English, contained imbedded meanings that expressed specific values, Pocahontas may have searched for the deeper symbolism of the antimasque. Perhaps she also saw some of her own people’s passion for both individual and group expression in the strange antics of the English.

¹ McManus, *Woman on the Renaissance Stage*, 29.

² McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 24.

³ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 146.

⁴ Jonson, “The Vision of Delight,” 115. Unfortunately, the meaning of “Burratines” has been lost to time. It probably referred to an item of clothing worn by the dancers as they appeared from the belly of the “she-monster,” which was in all likelihood an element of scenery.

FEMALE PERFORMANCE

Through their courtly performance, the English also expressed attitudes towards gender roles that Pocahontas would have found at once strange and yet familiar. If Pocahontas visited any other theatrical displays during her many months in London, she would have undoubtedly noticed the lack of women on stage. However, court masques were an exception. Although the English traditionally disapproved of women appearing in public forums like theatre or dance, in court masques women were necessary and desirable participants.¹ Part of this tolerance for female performance came from the influence of one of the masque's greatest supporters: Queen Anne. Anne insisted in being a part of these performances and both she and her ladies-in-waiting frequently danced in the masques.² Jacobean courtly society tolerated female performance in these masques because it was seen as participation in court life rather than as a true performance. As noblewomen danced on stage they marked themselves as members of the courtly elite.³

Women's participation in the English court masques began when Queen Anne brought more open ideas about female performance down from the Scottish Stuart court after James I inherited the English throne in 1603.⁴ During the early years of James's English reign, Anne and her female companions regularly graced the stage and Anne worked closely with writer Ben Jonson and designer Inigo Jones to create impressive spectacles for the royal court. Although Anne withdrew from the stage after her son's untimely death in 1612, female performance continued intermittently in the following years. The 1617 production of *Cupid's Banishment*, for example, was organized and performed by members of the first recorded

¹ McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 1.

² McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 3.

³ McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 8.

⁴ McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 68.

English girl's school, the Ladies Hall at Deptford.¹ Unfortunately, the absence of records makes it difficult to establish whether or not female dancers performed in the 1616-17 production of *The Vision of Delight*. However, if Pocahontas did see women dancing in the masque, she probably thought it fitting that this expression of community involvement and belonging was open to members of both sexes.

Among the Powhatans, women, like men, participated in the dances that welcomed friends, intimidated enemies, and honored spirits. John Smith even recorded a dance in which Pocahontas herself participated. According to his account, Smith was on his way to pay a visit to Powhatan, when "Pocahontas and her women" entertained the Englishman and his companions in the following manner:

In a fayre plaine field they made a fire, before which, he sitting upon a mat, suddainly amongst the woods was heard such a hydeous noise and shrieking, that the English betooke themselves to their armes, and seized on two or three old men by them, supposing that Powhatan with all his power was come to surprise them. But presently Pocahontas came, willing him to kill her if any hurt were intended, and the beholders, which were men, women, and children, satisfied the Captaine there was no such matter. Then presently they were presented with this anticke; thirtie young women came naked out of the woods, onely covered behind and before with a few greene leaves, their bodies all painted, some of one colour, some of another, but all differently, their leader had a fayre payre of Bucks hornes on her head, and an Otters skinne at her girdle, and another at her arme, a quiver of arrows at her backe, and bow and arrows in her hand; the next had in her hand a sword, another a club, another a pot-sticke; all horned alike: the rest every one with their severall devises. These fiends with most hellish shouts and cryes, rushing from among the trees, cast themselves in a ring about the fire, singing and dauncing with most excellent ill varietie, oft falling into their infernall passions, and solemnly againe to sing and daunce; having spent neare an houre in this Mascarado, as they entered in like manner they departed.²

Although Smith almost certainly embellished this account to appeal to the imaginations of his English audiences, if he did witness a similar performance it probably carried a good deal of significance for the dancers. These women used their performance to

¹ McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 180.

² Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 168.

both intimidate and welcome the Englishmen. By running out of the woods without warning, yelling and shrieking, they certainly managed to put their guests on edge. By dressing as warriors with bows, arrows, clubs, and swords, the women reminded their guests of the Powhatans' military prowess. However, the simple fact that they were women helped to diffuse the danger that they were exhibiting. Through showing off their people's power without directly threatening the foreigners, they offered a double-edged welcome to Powhatan's territory. Rather than meeting with a true Powhatan war party, the English were greeted by female "warriors" who danced to entertain them. Later in the evening, Smith reported, the women pressed about him, crying, "Love you not me? Love you not me?"¹ Then they feasted the Englishmen and danced for them once more. Thus the women completely turned the situation around from a terrifying display of martial power to a welcoming invitation of love and friendship. Through dancing, the Powhatan women illustrated their people's alliance with the English, showing the foreigners that it was better to remain friends than to risk warfare.

For Powhatan women, like men, dance offered a way to affirm one's community identity and could even be used to build friendships and alliances with outsiders. Dance played a central role in the existence of any Powhatan individual by providing a medium of cultural expression that was open to both men and women. For Pocahontas, viewing female performers at the English court masque would have seemed appropriate. As members of the court community, noblewomen had the responsibility to express their group-belonging. For Pocahontas, women's presence in the masque may also have been seen as vital for creating alliances with outsiders by balancing male power and by diffusing any potential hostility

¹ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 168.

between groups. She may have seen a strange likeness between the alliance-building strategies of her own people and those of the English.¹ However, while the Powhatans used dance and female performance to extend kinship ties to foreigners, Pocahontas may have noticed that the English appeared more invested in conveying a sense of their own opulence, superiority, and exclusive membership to a courtly elite.

LINES OF INHERITANCE

Female performers on the Twelfth Night stage may have made Pocahontas consider women's roles in other facets of English society. Especially interesting to her in this courtly context would have been female opportunities for power within English high society.

Noblewomen could dance in court masques, but could they lead and govern a people? In Jamestown and Henrico, Pocahontas was taught the "proper" duties of an English wife and mother. According to this English view, women were not supposed to overstep their bounds or to infringe on the societal positions of men. Yet, when it came to power, noble families without male heirs preferred to pass on their power to women than to lose their authority altogether.² Pocahontas may have noted this contradiction in English approval of female power with interest. Among the Powhatans, elite women often attained a high level of authority, unlike English noblewomen who usually only gained power as their family's last resort.

Unlike the English, the Powhatans traced inheritance matrilineally. In 1612, William Strachey noted that Powhatan's "kingdome descendeth not to his sonnes or children, but first

¹ Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness*.

² Bonnie S. Anderson and Judith P. Zinsser, *A History of Their Own: Women in Europe From Prehistory to the Present, Volume II*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 44.

to his brethren...and after their decease, to his sisters; first to his eldest sister, then to the rest, and after them to the heires-male and female of the eldest sister, but never to the heires-male.”¹ For the Powhatans, it was the children of elite women, not men, who inherited authority and as such these women held unique power. In addition, although male heirs inherited power before their sisters, these sisters eventually ruled before power was passed down to the next generation. By passing down power in the female line, Powhatans ensured that authority remained in their bloodline. No “illegitimate” children could sneak their way to power as those who ruled were always born directly to elite mothers of the ruling family.

Powhatan female rulers were frequently noted by the Englishmen who interacted with coastal Algonquian groups. William Strachey reported that at least two of Powhatan’s lesser werowances were female. One of these women, Opussoquionuske, “was of the power to have spared, upon comaund, some twenty able fighting men.”² Werowansquas, as these female rulers were called, ruled in their own right and even if they married, their husband gained no special office or power.³ Leading warriors and ruling over their people, these women often used their gender to their advantage. For example, Opussoquionuske managed to ambush a group of Englishmen by entreating them “to leave their armes in their boate, because they said how their women would be afrayd ells of their peeces.”⁴ The Englishmen fell for the queen’s plea in contrast to their more typical refusal to give up their weapons in the presence of Powhatan and other male werowances. Growing up in the traditions of her people, Pocahontas

¹ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 70.

² Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 56.

³ Will Roscoe, *Changing Ones: Third and Fourth Genders in Native North America*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), 74.

⁴ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 56.

would have appreciated women's potential to wield power and perhaps expected similar opportunities for Englishwomen.

Among the English, however, inheritance was traced patrilineally. By the seventeenth century, dynasties in Europe had established their hegemony using the principle of inheritance in the direct male line.¹ Pocahontas would have been exposed to this alternate view of inheritance during her time among the English in Virginia. Undoubtedly she learned that her son Thomas was his father's direct inheritor and that John Rolfe's growing plantation would be passed down to him rather than to any of the Rolfe siblings that remained in England. However, her understanding of English inheritance rules would have been challenged when she went to London and learned more about the English monarchy. First, she would have discovered that the two English monarchs prior to James I had both been female. Mary I and Elizabeth I inherited the throne sequentially in the years following their younger brother's death. In 1616, Elizabeth's rule was still fresh in the minds of Englishmen and women who celebrated their beloved queen's accession to the throne annually on November 17.² Moreover, Pocahontas may also have learned that the current monarch, James I, had inherited power from his mother. Succeeding Mary Queen of Scots to the Scottish throne, James had then inherited England through the claim that his great-grandmother, Margaret, was the older sister of Henry VIII of England.³ For Pocahontas, Mary and Elizabeth's rules and James's accession would have suggested inheritance patterns much more similar to those observed by her people than to those professed by the English in Jamestown. She may have noted this contradiction and concluded that female power among the English was more common than

¹ Anderson, *A History of Their Own*, 51.

² Cressy, "The Protestant Calendar," 45.

³ Stewart, *The Cradle King*, 161.

the colonists had implied; not realizing that only an unusual combination of circumstances permitted women to inherit power in the male-dominated world of seventeenth-century England.

COSTUMES AND CUSTOMS

The attire of female dancers on the Jacobean stage also revealed contradictions in seventeenth-century English society. Inigo Jones, a talented designer, was responsible for creating both the elaborate masque scenery and the intricate costumes that changed simple plays into courtly spectacles. Jones based many of his designs on the classical figures so admired by Europeans during the Renaissance. Fusing these classical elements with Italian and English styles, Jones created costumes that dazzled spectators while remaining light enough to permit easy movement onstage.¹ For female performers, the costumes of the masque were unique in their display of the female form. Contrasting with Puritan English notions of modesty and propriety, aristocratic performers often bared their breasts to courtly audiences in accordance with the styles expressed in classical Greek and Roman art.² For women of the court, such exposure was deemed acceptable, but only because it was done in the private context of the courtly world. Indeed, in the personalized miniature paintings that courtiers exchanged among themselves during the early modern era, women often appeared bare-breasted.³ This style was adapted from French courtly fashions and carried on through the Elizabethan and Jacobean reigns. For Pocahontas, such displays at the masque would have been intriguing not because of her personal feelings regarding the exposure of breasts, but

¹ McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 123.

² McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 127.

³ McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 130.

because of how this style contrasted with the demands for modesty put upon her by the English in Jamestown.

Among the Powhatans, styles of dress contrasted significantly with those of the Englishmen that they encountered. Unlike the English who relied on textile guilds to make their fabrics, the Powhatans made their garments individually. Using the “skynns of wyld beasts” they made mantles, “some embroidered with white beads, some with copper, others painted after their manner.”¹ In other instances, the Powhatans stuck “long blades of grasse, the leaves of trees, or such like, under the broad baudricks of leather, which covers them behind and before.”² Relying on oil and paint to keep their skin warm in the winter, the Powhatans held very different standards of modesty than did the English. Young Powhatan girls, for example, were free to go about naked and “nor are they much ashamed thereof.”³ Unlike the English, the Powhatans did not view nudity as immoral, especially for prepubescent children.

Although their attitudes towards the body differed from those of the English, the Powhatans did have their own standards of modesty. When girls reached maturity they were expected to wear a leather apron to cover their lower bodies and to identify them as adult women. According to William Strachey, “the better sort of women cover themselves (for the most part) all over with skin mantels, finely drest, shagged and fringed at the skirt, carved and couloured with some pretty work.”⁴ Legs, arms, and breasts left exposed were then

¹ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 65.

² Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 65.

³ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 65.

⁴ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 65.

“cunningly ymbrodered” with tattoos and Powhatan women further decorated themselves with strings of copper and pearls.¹

When Pocahontas was kidnapped by the English and conducted to their fort, her own standards of modesty and decorum were no longer considered sufficient. As the settlers tried to mold her into their image of an English lady, they dressed her in English fashions and covered her tattooed body with long skirts, sleeves, and high collars. Under the guidance of Reverend Whitaker, Pocahontas undoubtedly learned of Adam and Eve’s original sin and of the supposed shameful of nudity. When she traveled to London a few years later, she probably imagined all Englishmen held these same notions of propriety.

At the court masque, however, Pocahontas would have been exposed to the shifting standards of modesty of the English aristocracy. Although non-courtly people, like most of the men she knew in Jamestown, would have been shocked by the female nudity on display in the masque, for Jacobean courtly audiences these exposures were permitted.² Perhaps Pocahontas felt frustrated by this contradiction: the settlers in Jamestown had declared Powhatan styles immodest, yet English rulers allowed similar fashions within their courts. Perhaps she simply felt amused. The English, with all their claims to superior morality, in many ways were no different than her own people. They made her dress in the heavy folds of English fabric for modesty’s sake, yet they did not always practice what they preached.

PAINTING IDENTITY

Another element of English display and decoration that may have appeared strangely familiar to Pocahontas was the dancers’ use of face and body paint. In 1605, Queen Anne and

¹ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 65.

² McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 130.

other female dancers astonished English audiences in *The Masque of Blackness* by painting their arms and faces black in order to represent African “daughters of Niger.”¹ One courtier reported that “instead of Vizzards, their Faces, and Arms, up to the Elbows, were painted black, which was Disguise sufficient, for they were hard to be known.”² For the English, face and body paint added to the spectacle of the masque. Like the antimasque, body paint opposed the requirements of court decorum by evoking an exotic, sexualized expression of femininity.³ By exposing their painted limbs to courtly audiences, female performers pushed the boundaries of acceptable Jacobean body displays and defied English conventions of associating the color white with purity. For the English court, such exhibitions were often quite unsettling in their illustration of feminine sexual power.⁴ If Pocahontas saw similar use of body paint in the 1616-17 masque, however, she would not have found the display nearly so shocking. For the Powhatans, body paint was commonly used for both ritualistic and practical purposes.

As a Powhatan woman, Pocahontas would have learned to use body paint from an early age. William Strachey later described the Powhatan practice as follows: “Their heads and shoulders they paint oftenest, and those red with the roote pochone, brayed to powder, mixed with oyle of the walnut, or bear’s grease.”⁵ Experimenting with various roots and natural dyes, the Powhatans developed several different kinds of paint that they shared amongst themselves. Bloodroot, a plant common in Virginia, was most frequently used to

¹ McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 12.

² McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 1.

³ McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 11.

⁴ McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 16.

⁵ Strachey, *Historie of Travaile*, 64.

produce a red color, while inkberry or decaying alder leaves were used to make black paint.¹ Some dyes were considered more prestigious than others and thus were only applied on special occasions. Puccoon, for example, was a rare red-dye-producing plant that Powhatan demanded as tribute from his lesser werowances.² The great chief would then distribute this paint among his wives or wear it himself when meeting with foreign dignitaries. Powhatan men and women occasionally also added further decoration to their body paint by mixing in antimony ore. According to John Smith, the Powhatans collected this mineral and “put it in little bagges and sell it all over the country to paint there bodyes, faces, or idols; which makes them looke like Blackmores dusted over with silver.”³ This shiny dust excited the Englishmen who first beheld it as they originally believed it was “silver ore.”⁴

The Powhatans applied body paint for various reasons. Paint functioned in Powhatan ceremonies to symbolically mark the ritualistic roles of community members. During funerals, for example, Powhatan women mourned the dead by painting their faces black. This practice illustrated the women’s emotional condition and distinguished them as relatives of the deceased. Black paint’s use in this ceremony suggests that the Powhatans associated the color with death and sorrow.⁵ Black paint was also applied by Powhatan boys as they underwent their community’s manhood rituals, which included the symbolic “deaths” of boys as they became men.⁶ Body paints were also employed in more joyous celebrations. During dances, both men and women took extra care to decorate their bodies, “some of one colour,

¹ Rountree, The Powhatan Indians of Virginia, 76.

² Rountree, The Powhatan Indians of Virginia, 76.

³ Kupperman, Captain John Smith, 94.

⁴ Rountree, The Powhatan Indians of Virginia, 76.

⁵ Rountree, The Powhatan Indians of Virginia, 76.

⁶ Rountree, The Powhatan Indians of Virginia, 77.

some of another, but all differing.”¹ This variety of decoration may have allowed dancers to express their individual identities, while the dancing itself marked them as members of the same community. Body paint was also used by men as they went into battle. Sometimes warriors would add other substances to their war paint, including “the soft downe of sundry Coloured birdes” and “the hair of Beasts.”² In this context, paint and decoration perhaps symbolically displayed a warrior’s prowess and helped him to intimidate his enemies.

In addition to ritualistic uses, most Powhatans also wore some sort of paint daily for practical purposes. As William Strachey reported, the Powhatans held that the paint “in summer doth check the heat, and in winter arnes them in some measure against the cold.”³ The paint may have protected the Powhatans from insect bites as they worked in the fields around their homes or went out on hunting expeditions.⁴ In addition, the daily painting of skin perhaps helped to forge a common group identity. Different families or clan groups could have used certain colors to distinguish themselves and to create unity among their members. Powhatans may also have applied paint to symbolically illustrate their achievements: “Manie other formes of paintings they use, but he is the most gallant who is the most monstrous and uglie to behold.”⁵ The daily practice of painting their bodies may have helped Pocahontas’s kinsmen to reaffirm their identity as Powhatan.

It is intriguing to ask how Pocahontas would have reacted to seeing English dancers wearing body paint. Rather than seeing paint as a disturbing display of indecorum, she probably would have viewed its use as a way for dancers to distinguish their roles in the

¹ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 168.

² Rountree, *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia*, 77.

³ Strachey, *Historie of Travaile*, 64.

⁴ Rountree, *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia*, 76.

⁵ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 64.

masque and to mark their personal achievements. Drawing from her Powhatan cultural understanding, she perhaps appreciated the English's application of paint in the ceremonial context of the court masque.

EMERGING RACIAL THOUGHT

The English use of face and body paint, however, could also have held more negative connotations for Pocahontas. As she witnessed English reactions to the dyed and decorated performers, she may have found herself face-to-face with the emerging racialized attitudes of seventeenth-century English society. For the English, body paint marked dancers as exotic “others” and courtiers’ reactions to this depiction were not always favorable. Sir Dudley Carleton remarked that the black paint worn by Queen Anne and her ladies in *The Masque of Blackness* “became them nothing so well as their red and white, and you cannot imagine a more ugly sight than a troop of lean-cheek’d Moors.”¹ In seventeenth-century England, racialized thought was in its early stages of development as Europeans began to compare themselves both culturally and physically to people in other geographic regions. Although ideas about race were in flux during this time period—ill-formed and nebulous—they were beginning to harden and to be expressed through the language of color.² Directly witnessing the negative reactions of English nobles to painted “others” may have made Pocahontas wonder how this emerging ideology of intolerance would affect her own people and their relations with the English in Virginia.

The Englishmen who encountered the Native peoples of North America were initially unsure of what to make of these “others.” Trying to fit the Powhatans into their pre-existing

¹ McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 1.

² Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness*.

worldview, English writers like William Strachey imagined that Indians were descendents of Noah's son Ham, a Biblical character who, along with his family, "were the only far travelers and straglers into divers and unknowne countries, searching, exploring, and sitting downe in the same."¹ By envisioning Native peoples as long-lost Biblical relatives, Englishmen in the early seventeenth century were inclined to think of Powhatans as physically similar to themselves. They attributed differences in appearance to environment rather than to biology, suggesting that Powhatan cultural practices were responsible for changing the Natives' physical characteristics: "they are from the womb indifferent white, but as the men, so doe the women, dye and disguise themselves into this tawny cowler."² During the early years of colonialism, the English saw Indians as fully human despite their cultural dissimilarities.

However, although Englishmen viewed the Powhatans as human, they did not show respect for Native culture or beliefs. According to their Biblical-based outlook, Native Americans, once a people of God, had lost their path: "what countrye soever the childrene of Cham happened to possesse, there beganne both the ignoraunce of true godliness, and a kind of bondage and slavery to be taxed one upon another."³ From the settlers' perspective, it was the responsibility of the English to bring "civilization" to the Powhatans, just as the Romans had done in Britain.⁴ When Powhatans resisted this forced cultural change, the English began to grow less tolerant in their views of Native peoples.

Over the years, the English developed more racialized views of Native peoples as they competed for land and power in North America. By the time of John Smith's 1624 writing, he described Powhatan as "more like a devil then a man" and further dehumanized the leader by

¹ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 45.

² Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 63.

³ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 45.

⁴ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 18.

stating that his “grim Courtiers stood wondering at him, as he had beene a monster.”¹ For the English, one way to define the difference between themselves and Native peoples was through color. Early modern Englishmen already made negative associations with colors like black, relating the shade to ugliness and to the black-faced devils of mystery plays. English nobles also associated tanned skin with the menial, outdoor labor of the lower classes.² Thus, as they looked for ways to separate themselves from people they wished to colonize or enslave, the English and other Europeans made distinctions of worth and created levels of humanity based on skin color.

By Pocahontas’s time, the English already held negative attitude towards the dark-skin color of African peoples. Pocahontas may have witnessed this mindset if she saw a display similar to that of *The Masque of Blackness*. Englishmen and women were also beginning to develop racialized ideas about Native Americans. Although William Strachey contended that the Powhatans appeared “nothing so unsightly as the Moores,” he did make numerous comments on their physical characteristics that served to separate them from Europeans.³ Moreover, during Pocahontas’s stay in England, one courtier chose to describe the Powhatan woman as “no fayre Lady,” undoubtedly basing his opinion on her non-European features while judging her according to English standards of beauty.⁴ If Pocahontas saw English nobles disparage the painted bodies of masque performers, she may have questioned how they viewed her own people. The Powhatans, like the English performers, looked different and exotic to the English. As she saw the English react negatively to the appearance of “others” in

¹ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 64-65.

² McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 11.

³ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 64.

⁴ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 148.

the Jacobean court, Pocahontas may have feared that such a rejection of difference would one day devastate the peace she had helped to create between her people and the English.

MEN IN FEMININE ROLES

Due to fragmentary records, it is not altogether clear whether or not female dancers graced the stage during the Twelfth Night masque of 1616-17. With that said, Pocahontas would have surely witnessed another intriguing performance: male dancers dressed as women. For the English, female performance was often deemed inappropriate, yet female parts had to be played in staged productions. Outside of courtly performances, female roles were always performed by men and Pocahontas would surely have seen this theatrical cross-dressing if she went to any of the plays that regularly entertained the London populace in the early seventeenth century. Even in court productions, where female dancing was tolerated, women were only rarely permitted to have speaking roles.¹ Instead, male actors dressed as women would perform in these parts, dancing and singing in juxtaposition with the noblewomen engaged in the masque.² In *The Vision of Delight*, many of the speaking characters were female and these parts would have been portrayed by professional male transvestite actors. For the English, male performance in women's attire was accepted as an appropriate way of portraying female characters without resorting to supposedly improper public displays of female acting. For Pocahontas, however, these cross-dressing performances may have held a different significance. She may have wondered if these men held a special third-gender status among the English, a role that involved unique spiritual powers.

¹ McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 7.

² McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 6.

Across North America, many groups of Native people accepted alternative gender roles for certain members of their community. The anthropologist Will Roscoe notes that male “berdaches” or “two-spirited” people have been documented in over 155 Native North American groups.¹ These individuals lived and loved as members of the opposite sex. They excelled in the activities usually regulated to the opposite sex and they dressed in transvestite clothing.² Unfortunately, the English writers who observed the Powhatans remained silent about third gendered individuals among the Algonquians of coastal Virginia. This lack of evidence, however, does not mean that such roles did not exist. The English may simply have chosen to ignore gender variances that uncomfortably challenged their preconceived notions of acceptable relations between the sexes. Another possibility is that third-gendered individuals among the Powhatans avoided contact with the English strangers, recognizing that their lifestyle would not be tolerated among the foreigners. Third-gender roles among Algonquian groups in the mid-west like the Illinois and the Ojibwa were well-documented by French missionaries in the 1600s and in later centuries similar roles were also observed among southeastern groups like the Cherokees. Therefore, it seems quite likely that the Powhatans also accepted gender variance, or at the very least, knew of other Native groups who did.³

If third-gender roles among the Powhatans followed similar patterns to those of other Native American groups, then these two-spirited individuals would have held special spiritual roles and made unique contributions to their communities.⁴ Although cross-dressing was often used by Native communities to punish cowards or captives, this punitive employment of

¹ Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 7.

² Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 8.

³ Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 13.

⁴ Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 4.

transvestite dress was distinguished from its use among two-spirited people.¹ Two-spirited individuals were not considered failed men or women. Rather, they occupied distinct gender roles that had their own spiritual sanctions.² For many third-gendered people, supernatural intervention in the form of visions or dreams was believed to have initiated their transformation into these alternative roles. Due to this spiritual approval and to the two-spirited individuals' liminal position between male and female, these individuals were often thought to hold spiritual power.³ According to a Jesuit priest who lived among the Illinois, third-gendered people "pass for Manitous—that is to say, for spirits."⁴ Two-spirited people may have worked as shamans or as healing specialists and were thus treated with deference by other members of their community.⁵

As possessors of exceptional sacred power, two-spirited individuals held important positions within their communities. Through advising leaders, healing the sick, contacting the spirit world, and bridging the gap between men and women, these people achieved a unique status and position of honor among their people. As Pocahontas watched male actors perform as women on the courtly stage of the Twelfth Night masque, she may have seen the men as occupying similar societal roles infused with sacred power. Viewing the men as third-gendered individuals, she perhaps interpreted the words they said and the dances they performed as part of a sacred ceremony that involved contact with the spiritual world.

¹ Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 9.

² Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 5.

³ Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 8.

⁴ Raymond Hauser, "The Berdache and the Illinois Indian Tribe during the Last Half of the Seventeenth Century," *American Encounters: Natives and Newcomers from European Contact to Indian Removal, 1500-1850*, edited by Peter C. Mancall and James H. Merrell, (New York: Routledge, 2000), 122.

⁵ Hauser, "The Berdache and the Illinois Indian Tribe," 126.

FAVORITES OF THE KING

In addition to seeing the transvestite actors on the English stage, Pocahontas may also have noted the preferential treatment King James bestowed on certain male members of his court. In the 1618 masque, *Pleasure Reconciled to Virture*, for example, the king rewarded his favorite courtier, George Villiers, “with extraordinary signs of affection, touching his face” for the way that the young man “danced a number of very high and very tiny capers with such grace and lightness that he made everyone admire and love him.”¹ The masque that Pocahontas’s attended was in fact dedicated to the same George Villiers, who the king had recently promoted to the Earl of Buckingham.² If James favored the new earl with signs of admiration similar to those he bestowed upon him a year later, Pocahontas may have interpreted the relationship as a symbol of James’s power as king.

Throughout his life, James I formed intimate friendships with young men. These young nobles became the “constant bedfellow[s]” of the king and in return he helped them rise in society and make good marital matches.³ Members of the court frequently speculated about these relationships, some Englishmen even wondering if “some horrible punishment” would fall on England for this “sin in the prince as well as the people.”⁴ Yet despite their religious misgivings, the royal court generally had to accept these “favorites.” As king, James had the power to punish any who dared question his actions. When a book entitled *Corona Regia* commented on James’s relationships, for example, James launched an international search for the author, promising to punish the writer for spreading libel against the king.⁵

¹ McManus, *Women on the Renaissance Stage*, 51.

² Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 145.

³ Stewart, *The Cradle King*, 257.

⁴ Stewart, *The Cradle King*, 279.

⁵ Stewart, *The Cradle King*, 280.

King James had good reason to wish to preserve his reputation. Englishmen of the seventeenth century considered homosexuality a grievous sin. The English colonists in Virginia were particularly strict on this matter: according to the colony's laws, "No man shall commit the horrible and detestable sins of sodomy upon pain of death."¹ Yet from Pocahontas's perspective, homosexual relationships may not have seemed so unusual. Third-gendered individuals in Native societies regularly married and lived with members of the same-sex. Moreover, the partners of these "berdaches" were not labeled in any way: they retained the gender and sexual identities of men or women.² Perhaps Pocahontas interpreted James's lovers as third-gendered "wives" of the king. After all, from her Powhatan perspective polygynous relationships were natural, especially for rulers. Pocahontas's father married over one hundred women during his lifetime to create political alliances and to display his power and privilege.³ Not only were multiple marriages a sign of wealth and prestige, but many Native communities also believed that intimate relations with two-spirited people could transfer sacred power to the non-berdache partner. Among the Ojibwa, for example, warriors engaged in sexual relations with the two-spirited Ozaw-wen-dib before battle in the hopes of gaining this individual's fighting ability and courage.⁴ Thus, Pocahontas may have seen James I's relationships with his favorites as a way for the king to gain sacred power and to show off his prestige as the ruler of England. Unlike James's own courtiers, she probably did not condemn the king's relationships but only wondered why they were not formalized like her father's marriages.

¹ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 183.

² Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 10.

³ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 139.

⁴ Roscoe, *Changing Ones*, 9.

A KING'S WELCOME

Although King James did not dedicate his winter celebration to the Powhatan princess and her priestly companion, he perhaps believed that he sufficiently honored these foreigners by well-placing them at the masque. By the class-conscious standards of English society, placement near the king at courtly functions was an honor indeed. Both John Chamberlain and Captain Smith thought enough of the gesture to remark on it in their writings. Yet, James's reception of Pocahontas paled in comparison to the honors he bestowed on European royals. During King Christian of Denmark's visit to England ten years earlier, for example, the Twelfth Night masque had revolved around him.¹ Perhaps drawing on the emerging racialized thought of his day, James felt that a "savage" princess did not deserve the same level of respect. Whether or not Pocahontas realized that her reception lacked the majesty typically bestowed on foreign nobles, she probably was not entirely satisfied by the English king's welcome. Among the Powhatans, guests were ceremoniously received with great honor and respect; to do otherwise not only slighted guests but also threatened the security of carefully maintained alliances.

From the earliest days of the English settlement at Jamestown, colonists remarked on the grand welcomes they received in the villages of Powhatan and his lesser werowances. Hoping to build ties of mutually-beneficial friendship with the foreigners, many Powhatan chiefs chose to welcome Englishmen into their homes as honored guests. John Smith later recalled some of these Powhatan rituals of welcome as follows:

If any great commander arrive at the habitation of a werowance, they spread a mat as the Turkes doe a Carpet for him to sit upon. Upon another right opposite they sit themselves. Then doe all with a tunable voice of shouting bid him welcome. After this doe two or more of their chieftest men make an oration testifying their love. Which

¹ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 145.

they does with such vehemency, and so great passions, that they sweat till they drop, and are so out of breath they can scarce speake. So that a man would take them to be exceeding angry, or stark mad. Such a victual as they have, they spend freely, and at night where his lodging is appointed, they set a woman fresh painted red with Pocones and oyle, to be his bed-fellow.¹

By welcoming the English with words of love and long speeches of friendship, Powhatan werowances renewed ties of friendship and mutual obligations with their guests. These professions of alliance were then cemented with gifts of food and offers of sexual companionship. By sharing love, victuals, and sex with the foreigners, the Powhatans brought the English deep within their community, treating them as kinsmen and expecting friendship and respect in return.

Powhatan, as the greatest chief among the Algonquians of coastal Virginia, offered the most elaborate welcomes of all. He astounded the English with stately displays that they never expected of a “savage” king: “Powhatan carried himselfe so proudly, yet discreetly (in his salvage manner) as made us all admire his naturall gifts, considering his education.”² Through surrounding himself with “a guard of 40 or 50 of the tallest men his country doth afford” and his most beautiful young wives, Powhatan hoped to amaze foreign guests with awesome shows of power.³ He dressed in skillfully-crafted robes “made of Rarowcan skinnnes” and further displayed his wealth by bedecking each of his many wives with “a great chayne of white beads about their necks.”⁴ When Christopher Newport and John Smith visited the mamanitowik in the spring of 1608, “Powhatan strained himselfe to the utmost of his greatness to entertaine them, with great shouts of joy, orations of protestations; and with the

¹ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 147-148.

² Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 163.

³ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 155.

⁴ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 64.

most plenty of victuals he could provide to feast them.”¹ In addition to the feasts and the speeches, visitors to Powhatan’s realm were also treated to spectacles of music and dance. Before guests left, Powhatan also bestowed upon them parting gifts of friendship: when John Smith returned to Jamestown following his capture among the Powhatans, the mamanitowik sent with him “two [knapsacks] loaded with bread.”² Such elaborate welcomes were customary among the Powhatans to “renew their old acquaintance” and to reaffirm alliances.³ Pocahontas grew up in this world of majestic welcome and after hearing from her English companions about the greatness of King James, she would surely have been disappointed to find that the English ruler received guests without the same degree of ceremony and respect.

Uttamatomakin, for one, was highly unimpressed with the welcome of the English king. A few weeks after he attended the masque, he met John Smith in London. Requesting that Smith show him the English king, the captain protested that the priest had already met James. Uttamatomakin “denied ever to have seene the King, till by circumstances he was satisfied he had.”⁴ Very disappointed with the realization that no greater reception from the English monarch could be expected, Uttamatomakin sadly told Smith, “You gave Powhatan a white Dog, which Powhatan fed as himselfe, but your King gave me nothing, and I am better than your white Dog.”⁵ This rare glimpse into the feelings of a Powhatan individual in seventeenth-century London illustrates how deeply disillusioned such Natives were with the new world they encountered. From Uttamatomakin’s perspective, which was a viewpoint probably shared by Pocahontas, the English king had failed to live up to the Powhatans’

¹ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 163.

² Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 71.

³ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 163.

⁴ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 72.

⁵ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 72.

expectations. The English considered their monarch greater and more powerful than Powhatan, yet James treated his guests no better than dogs.

Pocahontas's experiences at the royal Twelfth Night Masque would have challenged her earlier understandings of the English. Courtly attitudes and expectations differed in many ways from the mores of the English in Jamestown and Pocahontas probably felt surprised by some of the contradictions she noted. In order to comprehend these new ideas and positions, she would have drawn from her Powhatan cultural knowledge to create a framework of understanding. She may have reinterpreted the actions of the English court so they made sense according to her Powhatan viewpoint, noticing strange likenesses between English and Powhatan attitudes towards dance, gender, sexuality, and alliance building. In this context, courtly traditions like female dancing would have pleased the Powhatan woman and reminded her of home. However, other English actions would only have disappointed her. From a Powhatan perspective, James I failed in his duties to offer a proper welcome to his guests, despite the splendor of the masque. Pocahontas may have felt disillusioned that as a representative of her people she was not fully welcomed by the most prestigious inhabitants of this new world. In the months to come, Pocahontas and her Powhatan companions would remove themselves from the strangely familiar yet often contradictory realm of English courtly life. The young Powhatan woman would embark on the final stage of her exploration of England, ultimately discovering not only how the English lived, but also how they died.

Chapter Five

Cycles of Life and Death:

Pocahontas's Final Hours at Gravesend

The swaying of the ship was becoming unbearable. Matoaka staggered out from the cramped cabin bed and leaned heavily on the small room's wooden walls. The effort had exhausted her.

"Matachanna?" she called. Her frail body racked with coughs. She lowered herself to the cabin floors, taking shallow, wheezing breaths. She coughed again.

"Matachanna?"

The cabin door open and Matoaka's half-sister hurried into the room.

"What are you doing?" Matachanna wailed, "You must get back into bed."

Matoaka allowed herself to be helped back into the bed, but as she lay down she began to cough again. Several droplets of blood stained her pale lips.

"Please, let me get Uttamatokin. He will know how to heal you. Please let me get him for you, my sister. I beg you."

"I cannot." Matoaka coughed again and then took long, wheezing breaths to steady herself. "It would not please John or any of them aboard this ship. They would never allow it. If Uttamatokin were to try to heal me and I died, they would call it witchcraft."

"But what if he healed you?"

"I wish. . ." Matoaka began, but then fell into another fit of coughing. "Your husband would bring me much comfort. I know that our father thinks highly of his powers of healing,

and so do I. But I must think of Thomas now. When I die, I need him to be looked after. I cannot have the English angry at me now. . .”

Matoaka closed her eyes and tried to calm her throbbing lungs. She knew that Matachanna was also ill and she did not want to worry her sister more. Taking slow breaths, Matoaka thought of the forests of Tenakomakah. She imagined the tall trees and the soft breeze rustling through the leaves. She thought of her father, his tired face and grey hair. Imagining her people, she saw in her mind’s eye the Powhatans’ healing rituals. She imagined a priest holding his gourd rattle above her, softly shaking it over her body as he touched her aching chest. She could almost feel the droplets of water that the priest would sprinkle upon her. Suddenly, a noise brought her back into reality.

“Rebecca?” It was John. Matachanna quietly left the couple alone, a look of grave concern on her face.

“Rebecca, I have told them that we must stop. You are too ill. We are to stop at Gravesend. I’ll call a doctor. It will be alright. Soon. . .” he voice broke down and Matoaka was astonished to see tears on his face.

“John, please. It is alright. Everyone must die. . .”

“Do not say that!” he paused, *“Oh, my brave, little Rebecca. I am so proud of your strength. You are a better Christian than I.”*

Later that day they docked at Gravesend. Matoaka awoke the next morning to find herself in a strange bed.

“John?”

“I am here.”

“Where is Thomas?”

Trying to rise to a sitting position, Matoaka felt her body once again shake in a fit of coughs. After regaining her breath, she looked around her. The room was small and dark. The window showed only the grey skies of a damp March morning. John, sitting in a chair beside the bed, looked drawn. His knuckles were white, as though he had been wringing his hands in despair.

“Thomas is with your sister. He is very ill. They all are, all of the Powhatans. But the doctor will arrive soon. . .”

Matoaka lay back in the bed. She thought of the little boy she held so dear. Only in his second year, he was so precious yet so fragile. She wanted to cry for him, for herself, and for the home that she knew she would never see again. She tightened her jaw. She would not cry. She was a Powhatan woman and as such it would be a disgrace to fear death.

She coughed again. A strange heaviness crept into her chest, weighing her down, pushing the air from her lungs. She struggled to breathe and once again felt the coppery taste of blood seep into her mouth.

“Please, John, bring Thomas to me.”

Her husband looked pained to leave her, but in a moment he returned, carrying the infant.

“My baby. . .” Matoaka sighed, stroking his little face. They will take care of him, she told herself. Even when I am gone, Thomas will be looked after.

She coughed again. Her chest felt even heavier now, as though someone was pushing down upon her. Looking at little Thomas once more, she felt comforted. The copper taste in her mouth was stronger now, but Matoaka smiled. She looked up at John, whose weary eyes had filled with tears.

“All must die,” she whispered, drawing a final breath. “Tis enough that the child livith.”

Pocahontas would never return to her homeland. Her trans-Atlantic voyage ended tragically in March, 1617. As she and her companions prepared for the voyage back to Virginia, a mysterious illness overtook her. Although no definite conclusions have been reached, the evidence suggests that it could have been anything from tuberculosis or pneumonia to the “bloody flux.”¹ Most of her fellow Powhatans suffered from this same sickness and at least one died. As Pocahontas and her family sailed down the Thames, she finally became too ill to continue. The *George*, captained by Samuel Argall, docked at Gravesend and the young woman was taken ashore to a local inn. There, in unfamiliar surroundings, Pocahontas finally died on the twenty-first of March. “The Virginian woman...died this last week at Gravesend, as she was returning homeward,” the English courtier John Chamberlain recorded in a letter.² She was not more than twenty-one years old.

Pocahontas’s final hours at Gravesend remain shrouded in mystery. The records of her death are brief and lack detail. Did she see a doctor? Was she given medicine? How long did she struggle with her illness before her eventual death? All of these questions can only be answered by piecing together the available records and by evaluating the medical practices and rituals surrounding illness and death in seventeenth-century England. Perhaps the greatest question of all is how Pocahontas perceived her sickness and coming demise. Like every cultural group, the Powhatans had specific rituals and traditions surrounding illness, death,

¹ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 157; Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 183.

² Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 183.

and burial. This chapter explores the difficult subject of dying in a trans-Atlantic world. It situates her passing in a cross-cultural context that once again reveals those strange likenesses that underscored commonalities between the Powhatans and the English and yet signified an unbridgeable chasm of difference. The familiarity of some English traditions may have brought Pocahontas comfort. However, other English customs would only have served to remind her that she was dying in a strange new land, thousands of miles from the comforts of home.

HEALERS OF THE SICK

When Pocahontas was brought ashore at Gravesend, it is likely that her English companions sent for a doctor. In seventeenth-century England, two very different kinds of medical practitioners may have examined the Powhatan woman in her final hours. One type of physician was the university-trained specialist. These doctors studied medicine in London and relied heavily upon the teachings of the Greek physician Galen, who had lived in the second century A.D.¹ Due to their followings of the secular teachings of a “pagan,” these academic doctors were sometimes regarded as irreligious by the English. To defend their profession, academic physicians criticized clergymen who practiced medicine, claiming that “the well-being of the body is no business of the guardians of the well-being of the soul.”² This position tended to perpetuate the image of doctors as atheists, which put them in a precarious situation in the religious world of Renaissance England. In the early seventeenth-century, the physician Sir Thomas Browne tried to counter this view of the irreligious nature

¹ Ole Peter Grell and Andrew Cunningham, editors, Religio Medici: Medicine and Religion in Seventeenth-Century England, (Aldershot, England: Scholar Press, 1996), 41.

² Grell, Religio Medici, 10.

of medical practice by writing *Religio Medici* and arguing that it was a God-given duty for natural philosophers to investigate God's creation; however, many Englishmen continued to view these physicians as apostates.¹

On the other side of the spectrum of English medical practitioners were medical astrologers. These individuals were not formally trained in an academic setting, but rather gained experience by treating numerous clients in public practices. Instead of relying solely on supposedly "scientific" means of diagnosing patients, like urology, these astrologers depended upon the study of the stars. Medical astrologers claimed to be able to diagnose a patient and predict an illness's outcome based upon the constellations of a patient's birth and the cosmological events that preceded that individual's illness. Astrologers were very popular among the English because they offered predictions in an uncertain world and made clients feel as though their fate was in the power of a higher cosmos. By the early seventeenth century, astrologers practiced in nearly every town in England. However, like the academic physicians, medical astrologers also faced criticism from religious Englishmen. Astrology always balanced on the edge of being considered a black art and even though the king himself employed astrologers, the religiously orthodox condemned the practice as diabolical.²

Both academic physicians and medical astrologers faced criticism from their contemporaries. A poor understanding of the body in seventeenth-century England meant that medical treatments frequently proved ineffective and occasionally deadly. One Englishman, John Toland, actually swore off physicians altogether, stating, "I shall never more put my self under the management of such, whose art is founded in darkness, and improv'd by Murther."³

¹ Grell, *Religio Medici*, 46.

² Grell, *Religio Medici*, 4, 65-70.

³ Grell, *Religio Medici*, 69.

Yet most Englishmen and women continued to go to doctors, even if they doubted the abilities of physicians. Ever hopeful for a diagnosis, advice, and possibly a cure, Englishmen and women turned to the only people they could for guidance and medicine.

If Pocahontas encountered either type of English doctor she might have been surprised by the disconnect between medical practice and accepted religious belief. For the Powhatans, religion and medicine fell into one category: the same men were practitioners in both fields.¹ Powhatan priests were also their healers: Henry Spelman stated that “when any be sick among them, their priests come unto the party.”² Among Pocahontas’s Powhatan companions in England was one such healer, Uttamatomakin.

As her father’s priestly advisor, Uttamatomakin undoubtedly held the scared knowledge used by the Powhatans to heal the sick. Pocahontas may have felt comforted by his presence on her final journey, perhaps even wishing that his healing talents could be used instead of those of the English physicians. However, Pocahontas’s English companions would probably have deemed Powhatan healing practices unacceptable. Both the English and the Powhatans believed in supernatural causes for disease and in seventeenth-century England the fear of witchcraft was very real. When English physicians could not cure an illness by natural means, they often blamed the sickness on witchcraft.³ Englishmen of the era also believed that the Powhatans were devil-worshippers, misunderstanding the Powhatans’ beliefs in the need to restore spiritual balance and to appease their deities through ritual. Henry Spelman wrote to his friends in England, “you must understand that for ye most part they worship ye

¹ Rountree, *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia*, 126. The purported absence of female Powhatan healers might be a function of the Englishmen who made the records. Coming from a decidedly patriarchal society, English colonists may not have believed Powhatan women could hold positions of power as medicinal practitioners. In addition, these English colonists may not have had access to the lives and traditions of Native women in the same way as they observed and participated in the activities of Powhatan men.

² Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 141.

³ Grell, *Religio Medici*, 74.

devil, which ye conjurers who are their priests can make appear unto them at their pleasure.”¹

For the English, Powhatan worship and “magic” would have seemed frightening.

Uttamatomakin’s services at Gravesend would not have been tolerated, even if the priest had been well enough to perform his healing rituals. Instead, Pocahontas’s English companions probably preferred to rely on their own physicians, regardless of their incompetence and alleged irreligious natures.

MEDICINE

The physicians who treated Pocahontas would have used a variety of medicinal cures. Adhering to the ancient Greek notion of “humoral imbalances” as one prevalent cause of illness, English doctors frequently prescribed remedies that sought to restore the balance of blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile.² Bleeding, purges, and emetics were often employed as solutions to humoral imbalance. Indeed, when King James’s eldest son Henry became deathly ill in 1612 he was initially treated with these methods.³ Pocahontas would not have understood the use of bleeding, although the Powhatans did utilize other forms of purgatives in the context of healing. William Strachey reported that “every spring [the Powhatans] make themselves sick with drincking the juyce of a roote which they call wighsacan and water, wherof they take soe great a quantity, that yt purgeth them in a very violent manner.”⁴ Vomiting could also be induced by drinking a mixture of water and “lesser sassafras” and emetics were created using American nightshade.⁵ However, the Powhatans

¹ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 138.

² Grell, *Religio Medici*, 74.

³ Stewart, *The Cradle King*, 248.

⁴ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 108.

⁵ Rountree, *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia*, 127.

had one form of purging that the English did not: the sweat lodge. William Strachey described how Powhatans afflicted with “dropseyes, swellings, aches, and such like deceases...buyld a stove in the forme of a dove howse, with matts soe close, that a fewe coals therein, covered with a pott, will make the patient sweat extreamey.”¹ This cure was believed to be very effective by the Powhatans and Pocahontas may have longed for the soothing effects of steam and heat, especially if she suffered from a lung disease.

When traditional remedies did not work, English physicians resorted to alternatives that could be termed as spiritual and even magical. Prince Henry, for example, was treated with pearl, the bone of a stag’s heart, unicorn’s horn, and a poultice of “warm cocks and pigeons newly killed” as his parents and physicians grew more desperate by his worsening illness.² Medical astrologers often gave patients “magical amulets,” which were metal emblems engraved with planetary signs and worn around the neck on silk ribbons. Patients were expected to say special prayers when they donned these amulets in order to make them religiously acceptable and spiritually powerful.³

Pocahontas would have understood the significance of these more mystical rituals of healing. Among the Powhatans, ritualistic healing practices were also employed when herbs, powders, and poultices did not suffice. After living among the Powhatans, Henry Spelman described the following ritual:

When any be sick among them, their priests comes unto the party, whom he layeth on the ground upon a mat. And having a bowl of water set between him and the sick party, and a rattle by it, the priest kneeling by the sick man’s side dips his hand into the bowl, which taking up full of water, he sups into his mouth, spouting it out again, upon his own arms, and breast. Then takes he the rattle, and with one hand takes that, and with the other he beats his breast, making a great noise, which having done he

¹ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 108.

² Stewart, *The Cradle King*, 248.

³ Grell, *Religio Medici*, 74.

easily riseth (as loath to wake the sick body) first with one leg, then with the other. And being now got up, he leisurely goeth about ye sick man shaking his rattle very softly over all his body, and with his hand he stroketh ye grieved parts of the sick. Then doth he besprinkle him with water mumbling certain words over him, and so for that time leave him.¹

As Pocahontas lay in her small inn-room bed, she perhaps longed for the spiritual comfort that Powhatan healing rituals could bring. Despite the efforts of the English physicians, however, her condition only worsened and hopes of healing soon turned to thoughts of death.

CONCEPTIONS OF THE AFTERLIFE

In the hours leading up to her death, Pocahontas surely contemplated her passage into the next world. During her past few years with the English, she was undoubtedly instructed in Protestant beliefs concerning the afterlife. Protestants, like their Catholic counterparts, believed that body and soul separated at death: the body was left to decompose while the immortal soul traveled on a mysterious, spiritual journey to heaven or hell.² Protestants, however, rejected Catholic notions of purgatory, claiming that it lacked scriptural foundation. Instead, they believed that passage into the next world was immediate. Some groups like the Puritan Calvinists felt that one's spiritual destination was preordained: at birth God had already decided who would go to heaven and who would burn in hell. Both Catholics and Protestants concurred, however, that eventually bodies and souls would be reunited and resurrected at the final judgment.³ During her years of instruction, Pocahontas would have

¹ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 141-142.

² Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 384.

³ Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death*, 387.

learned about these English notions of the afterlife. As she prepared to die, she may have considered their validity.

Powhatan notions of the afterlife stood in sharp contradistinction to the beliefs that Pocahontas learned from the English. She had many more years of instruction in these beliefs than she did in Protestant dogma, thus thoughts of the Powhatan afterlife undoubtedly entered her mind during her last days. According to the Jamestown colonists, the Powhatans “suppose that the common people shall not live after death.”¹ However, members of elite families like Pocahontas could expect their souls to “goe beyond the mountaynes, and travel as farr as where the sun setts into most pleasant fields, grownds, and pastures, where yt shall doe no labour; but...sing, daunce, and have all merrymments.”² In this happy land, “they fynd their forefathers lyving in great pleasure, in a goodly field, where they doe nothing but dawnce and sing, and feed on delitious fruicts with that great hare, who is their great god.”³ Visions of this joyful world and the possibility of reuniting with souls of her dead ancestors may have pleased Pocahontas.

Like the English, the Powhatans also believed in an eventual return to earth for the soul; however, they did not see this rebirth as a reunion with the old body but rather as a reincarnation of the soul into a new body. According to the Powhatan view, the soul in the afterlife eventually “waxe[d] old there, as the body did on earth, and then yt shall dissolve and die, and come into a woman’s womb againe.”⁴ Pocahontas may have felt comforted to think that she would one day return to earth, whether through reunion with her body at Judgment

¹ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 96.

² Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 96.

³ Strachey, *The Histoire of Travaile*, 100.

⁴ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 96.

Day or through Powhatan rebirth into a new form. Her final concerns in this life, however, were that she enter the afterlife bravely with firm resolve and lack of fear.

DYING WELL

English Protestants of the seventeenth century believed that people should be ready for death at all times. They thought that good Christians ought to feel comforted by their beliefs in the afterlife and not fear this passage into the next world. As one Englishman wrote, “it is a rebellious thing not to be content to die.”¹ Death brought the human soul back to God and therefore the English believed it should be seen as a joyous reunion rather than a tragic end. During Elizabethan and Jacobean times, the medieval *ars moriendi* or art of dying enjoyed a revival. Men like James Cole promoted a lifetime of preparation to “die well.”² Numerous publications in England offered guidance on preparation for death, helping readers to contemplate their own mortality. As Englishmen and women lay on their deathbeds, their friends and relatives gathered around to bear witness to a brave passing. Their last moments were closely observed and weighed for spiritual significance. If they died well, the English believed that it showed the depth of their Christian faith and provided a final offering pleasing to God. During English funeral eulogies, the manner of the deceased’s dying often received as much attention as the accomplishments of their life.³

For the Powhatans, fearlessness in the face of death was also expected of community members. By meeting their ends bravely, Powhatans showed their courage and won the respect of their families and friends. During his time in England, Uttamatomakin told Samuel

¹ Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death*, 381.

² Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death*, 389.

³ Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death*, 390.

Purchas that the Powhatans “helde it a disgrace to feare death, and therefore when they must dye, did it resolutely.”¹ Like the English, Powhatans died surrounded by friends and family who offered comfort in the last moments and witnessed the dying person’s bravery in the face of death.

Little is known of Pocahontas’s last moments. Surely she found comfort in the presence of her husband, John, and her Powhatan relatives. By all accounts, she met her end with courage and died well. John Smith later reported that “it pleased God at Gravesend to take this young Lady to his mercie, where shee made not more sorrow for her unexpected death, than joy to the beholders, to heare and see her make so religious and godly an end.”² For the English, Pocahontas’s final show of bravery confirmed her conversion to the Christian faith. She died like a proper Christian woman, without fear. For Pocahontas, however, courage in the face of death may also have been a final expression of her Powhatan identity. As a Powhatan woman and the daughter of the great mamanitowik, she met her death resolutely to bring honor to both herself and her kinsmen.

BURIAL

Following Pocahontas’s untimely death on that cold March morning, her English companions prepared her for burial. Captain Argall feared the winds would change and urged a speedy departure for Virginia, therefore the funeral was small and hurried.³ For the English, burials on the day of death were not unusual, especially for those bodies infected with

¹ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 157.

² Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 193.

³ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 158.

contagious disease.¹ Pocahontas's body was thus probably quickly cleaned and dressed by servant women before being conducted to the place of burial on the very day of her death.

For the English, embalming practices were expensive and therefore reserved for the rich.² Pocahontas's small stipend in England may not have covered this fee and the threat of changing tides meant that the English probably did not wait for an embalmer to be called. Instead her body may merely have been wrapped in a clean linen or wool sheet, perhaps taken from the inn in which she died. The English believed it was a point of human dignity to be buried in cloth: only animals were put into the earth naked.³

These English customs resonated with Powhatan practices. Pocahontas's people wrapped their dead "in skynnes and matts" in preparation for burial.⁴ However, considering her father's position as *mamanitowik* of the Powhatans, she might also have expected additional care to have been taken of her body. Among the Powhatans, the bodies of the elite "so soone as they be dead, they embowel, and scraping the flesh from off the bones, they dry the same upon hurdells into ashes."⁵ This ritualistic care of the body showed respect for elite leaders and their kinsmen and helped to symbolically maintain the chiefly status of the ruling class.⁶

After her body was wrapped, the Englishmen conducted Pocahontas to St. George's church in Gravesend. English funerals frequently included the distribution of doles to the poor

¹ Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death*, 426.

² Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death*, 427.

³ Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death*, 430.

⁴ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 90.

⁵ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 89.

⁶ Unfortunately our only records of Powhatan embalming and burial practices come from the Englishmen who observed them. These colonists were probably not privy to many of the Powhatans' rituals and their analysis of what the ceremonies meant to the Powhatans is not necessarily correct.

and Pocahontas's companions may have been motivated to do likewise at her funeral.¹

Throwing out small coins to onlookers, the English demonstrated their generosity of spirit in the midst of their grief. From a Powhatan perspective, this distribution of goods was entirely appropriate. Kinsfolk of the deceased at Powhatan funerals flung beads among the poor, "making them to scramble for them."² Both Powhatans and Englishmen viewed the death of a friend or relative as an opportunity to consider their own mortality. By being generous, Englishmen showed their munificence and perhaps hoped to win God's favor. For Powhatans, generosity perhaps served as a way to bind communities together and heal rifts in the face of the unbalanced spiritual power created by the death of a loved one.

Carrying sprigs of ivy, laurel, and rosemary that symbolized the soul's immortality, the English laid Pocahontas's body in the consecrated earth under the chancel of the church.³ For the English, burials within the church were typically reserved only for the elite who could pay for the removing and replacing of masonry.⁴ Ordinary Englishmen were laid to rest in the churchyard. Thus, the English honored this Powhatan princess by burying her in a privileged location. From a Powhatan perspective, this distinguished burial would have been appreciated. Only ordinary Powhatans were laid "upon sticks in the ground" and covered with earth.⁵ Members of the elite, like Pocahontas, were placed on a "scaffold built about three or four yards high from the ground" until the bodies "be consumed as nothing is left but bones." According to Henry Spelman, once the bodies had decomposed sufficiently, "they take those bones from ye scaffold, and putting them into a new mat, hang them in their houses, where

¹ Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death*, 443.

² Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 142.

³ Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death*, 438; Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 157.

⁴ Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death*, 463.

⁵ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 90.

they continue while their house falleth and then they are buried in the ruins of ye house.”¹ The bones of the most important Powhatans, like the mamanitowik, were placed on platforms “within the chauncell of the temple”, where they were hung with jewelry, tobacco pipes, pocoon and offerings of food.² These elite practices of burial distinguished Powhatan rulers from their followers and Pocahontas’s kinsmen might have appreciated that her burial in England, although hurried, was also granted this degree of distinction. However, they probably also felt sorrow that her burial did not follow the customs and include the rituals of the Powhatans. They may have worried that without the traditional burial of her people Pocahontas would be unable to pursue a Powhatan path to the afterlife.

It would be difficult to imagine that Pocahontas did not feel profound disappointment when it became clear to her, in her final hours, that her body would be buried so far from home. The Powhatans were frequently interred with family members or their bones were hung “in their houses” where they remained part of the living community.³ Yet Pocahontas’s bones lay an ocean away, in an English church rather than in a Powhatan home or temple. St. George’s church burned down in 1727 and the bones of all those buried beneath its stone floors were reburied in a mass grave outside the church walls. The reburial of her bones may also have been problematical from a Powhatan perspective considering their belief that human remains should be left buried in “the ruins of ye house.” Like many Native peoples struggling with issues of repatriation today, the Powhatans of the seventeenth-century may have believed

¹ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 142.

² Strachey, The Historie of Travaile, 89; Rountree, The Powhatan Indians of Virginia, 113.

³ Southern, The Jamestown Adventure, 142.

that any disturbance of Pocahontas's bones could disrupt her spiritual journey in the afterlife. The precise location of Pocahontas's bones remains a mystery to this day.¹

MOURNING THE DEAD

Pocahontas's hasty burial gave her friends and family in England little time to mourn her. Without further ceremony, the *George* left Gravesend and sailed to Plymouth, the final stop before the voyage back across the Atlantic. This hurried way of burying and the abandoning the dead cut against the grain of Powhatan custom. Her Powhatan friends aboard the ship almost certainly grieved over the fact that they had left without properly mourning her. Among the Powhatans, mourning rituals always accompanied the deaths of friends and relatives. Such ceremonies helped Powhatans deal with their loss and celebrate the life of the deceased. In 1612, William Strachey described one Powhatan mourning custom:

...the buryall ended, the women (being painted all their faces with black coale and oyle) do sitt twenty-four howers in their howses, mourning and lamenting by turnes, with such yelling and howling as may expresse their great passions.²

Through fervently mourning the dead during the day after the burial, these women marked themselves as relatives of the deceased and expressed their grief for the loss of a kinsman. Henry Spelman added that after a dead Powhatan's "kinsfolk fall a-weeping and make great sorrow" they followed their mourning with "singing and dancing, using then as much mirth as before sorrow."³ By expressing joy after sadness, the Powhatans celebrated the life of their departed friend and restored balance and unity to a community weakened with

¹ Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 184-185.

² Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 90.

³ Southern, *The Jamestown Adventure*, 142.

grief. They probably also believed that these rituals helped conduct their deceased kinsman on his journey to the afterlife.

Protestant English traditions held that death was the portal to everlasting life. According to this belief, excessive weeping for the dead was deemed inappropriate.¹ Although Englishmen saw failure to grieve as heartless, a mourner who remained sorrowful for longer than a week was considered weak and out of control.² The Powhatans in England would have wished to observe the proper mourning rituals for Pocahontas; however, from a Powhatan perspective, excessive grieving for her passing would also have seemed undesirable and spiritually dangerous. Other eastern woodlands groups like the Iroquois held that uncontrolled grief could plunge survivors into such despair that they would lose all reason and become a danger to themselves and to their community.³ Continual weeping for a deceased family member placed a community's cohesiveness in jeopardy by removing mourning group members from full community participation. In addition, the Powhatans felt that excessive grieving showed weakness. William Strachey reported that certain Powhatans mocked the English by singing songs that ridiculed "what lamentation our people made when they kild him [an Englishman named Simon], namely, saying how they would cry whe, whe, etc."⁴ For the Powhatans, continual and excessive mourning showed lack of control and lack of power, especially if the mourning was done by men. According to Strachey, Powhatan men "never bemoane themselves nor cry out, giving up so much as a groane for any death, how cruell

¹ Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death*, 388.

² Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death*, 393.

³ Richter, "War and Culture," 286.

⁴ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 80.

soever and full of torment.”¹ By remaining strong and stoic, Powhatan men denied grief the opportunity to harm their communities.

For Pocahontas’s Powhatan friends aboard the *George*, their quick departure denied them the time to grieve over Pocahontas’s grave. Perhaps they elected to express their sorrow among themselves in the hull of the ship as they crossed the Atlantic. After performing their private rituals of mourning, they probably endeavored to put aside their grief for the good of their families at home. When her demise was made known in Virginia, John Rolfe reported that his “wife’s death is much lamented.”² However, Pocahontas’s Powhatan relatives made an effort to overcome their sorrow by thinking of the future. Pocahontas’s son, Thomas, was “much desired” by her kinsmen in Virginia.³

SURVIVAL OF A SON

According to the documentary record, Pocahontas’s final words to her husband were of their son, Thomas. Comforting a man who had lost his first wife and child to illness as well, Pocahontas whispered, “all must die. T’is enough that the childe liveth.”⁴ Thomas Rolfe had brought much joy to the Powhatan woman and John Smith reported that Pocahontas loved her son “most dearly.”⁵ Naturally, her final thoughts rested with her child and with her hopes that he would live a long and happy life, despite her death. For the English, these final words may have been a sign of their own growing dominance in Virginia: the Indians were making way for a new race of Anglo-Americans. For Pocahontas, however, Thomas’s survival

¹ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 80.

² Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 160.

³ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 160.

⁴ Woodward, *Pocahontas*, 185.

⁵ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 67.

perhaps marked the continuation of her efforts to bring peace and mutual respect to the diverse inhabitants of Virginia. Thomas was a living symbol of the kinship ties his mother had hoped to create between her people and the English. She undoubtedly hoped that her legacy as an alliance-builder would live on through her son.

Thomas Rolfe was probably not more than two years old when his mother was stricken with her fatal illness. During her last days, Pocahontas may have regretted her coming death for the way it robbed her of the opportunity to continue on as his mother. Powhatan women, according to Smith, “are easily delivered of childe, yet doe they love children very dearely.”¹ In the harsh conditions of the seventeenth-century world, Powhatan women held on to their children as rays of joy and hope for the future. Powhatan mothers took pride in their children and helped to mold them into strong community members. Sons were taught to become warriors from an early age. According to William Strachey,

To practice their children in the use of their bowes and arrowes, the mothers doe not give them their breakfast in a morning before they have hitt a marke which she appoints them to shoot at.²

Pocahontas may have looked forward to the time when Thomas was old enough to learn the skills he would need to become a successful hunter and skilled Powhatan warrior. She may also have thought about his eventual entrance into Powhatan manhood: the ritual death of his child self for which she and her kinswomen would weep and cry out “very passionately.”³ She might have imagined her pride following his return to the community as an adult after “nine moones” in the wilderness where he would receive the sacred knowledge

¹ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 142.

² Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 110.

³ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 95.

of their people from the elder “priests and conjurers.”¹ During her final hours at Gravesend, Pocahontas may have contemplated her son’s future with the hope that despite her death, he would still learn the customs and undergo the traditional rituals of her people.

Thomas, however, did not grow up in the traditional ways of the Powhatans. Like his mother, he struggled with a terrible illness during the last weeks of their stay in London. Weakened, motherless, and lacking nursemaids, Thomas was left in his father’s hands. John Rolfe faced a difficult decision. The Powhatan kinswomen of his wife “had need of nurses themselves” and could not be expected to care for the child.² Thomas remained dangerously ill and many aboard the ship feared that the voyage across the Atlantic might have proved too much for him. Samuel Argall, captain of the *George*, pressured the distraught father to leave his son behind. After initially refusing, John finally agreed to leave Thomas at Plymouth.³ As John Smith later reported, “her little childe Thomas Rolfe therefore was left at Plimoth with Sir Lewis Stukly, that desired the keeping of it.”⁴ John’s brother, Henry Rolfe, later came to collect the child and raised him with his family in London.

Pocahontas probably would have been distraught if she had known the fate of her child. Although Henry Rolfe was family, she barely knew him and would have been saddened to think that Thomas would be raised by strangers. John Rolfe perhaps could guess his late wife’s feeling when he wrote, “I know not how I may be censured for leaving my child behind me.”⁵ Yet, Englishmen in the seventeenth century did not see anything wrong with children being raised outside of their natal home. In fact, many English mothers sent their

¹ Strachey, *The Historie of Travaile*, 95.

² Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 158.

³ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 158.

⁴ Kupperman, *Captain John Smith*, 193.

⁵ Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 158.

newborn babies away for up to a year-and-a-half to be cared for by wet nurses.¹ Moreover, as English children aged they were often sent to live as apprentices in “better” households so that they could advance themselves socially.²

For the Powhatans it was a different story. Powhatan parents were closely attached to their children and refused to be parted with them. Indeed, English insistence that Powhatans give up their children to live in Christian, English homes in Virginia was a contributing factor to the attack on the colonists in 1622. When Pocahontas’s relatives in Virginia heard that her child remained in England, they insisted that Thomas return “when [he] is of better strength to endure so hard a passage.”³ Like Pocahontas, they wished for her child to be raised among relatives who loved him dearly and who would teach him the ways of his mother’s people.

The Powhatans’ hope for Thomas’s return was not fulfilled for many years. Until that time, Pocahontas’s son remained in England where he grew up in the customs and the traditions of the English. Finally, when Thomas reached the age of twenty in 1635, he returned to the land of his birth. His voyage to Virginia suggests that despite his English upbringing, he retained a curiosity for his natal land and his mother’s people. When he reached Virginia, he petitioned the governor for the right to visit his uncle Opechancanough and his aunt “Cleopatra,” in spite of Anglo-Powhatan hostilities. He then took his place among the among the white Virginian gentry as a landowner, inheriting territory both from his father, who died in 1622, and from his grandfather, Powhatan. Thomas Rolfe lived the remainder of his life as an Anglo-Virginian. He became the commander of the James Fort and

¹ Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, & Death*, 91.

² Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 198.

³ Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 186.

served in the English militia.¹ He eventually married the daughter of an English colonist and they had one child together, a girl named Jane.² Thomas's later descendants had numerous children and many individuals in Virginia today continue to claim Pocahontas as an ancestor.

LIFE AND DEATH IN A TRANS-ATLANTIC WORLD

Pocahontas's death was deeply personal and private. Yet, it also provides a window on the medicinal practices and rituals surrounding dying for both Powhatan and English people. Both groups marshaled power—be it sacred or secular—to heal, both mourned the dead and believed in an afterlife, and both valued dying well. However, each did so in ways that perhaps seemed unintelligible to the other. The death of Pocahontas was not only the death of the most renowned woman in the seventeenth-century trans-Atlantic world, but it also marked the deterioration of peace between Natives and newcomers in Virginia as both groups emphasized their obvious differences rather than their surprising commonalities.

During her many months in London, Pocahontas witnessed a variety of different English cultural events. She saw the English defy their enemies with the Bonfire Night celebration and proclaim their wealth and power through the dances of the court masque. Through each event, she drew upon her Powhatan cultural perspective to make sense of traditions that initially may have seemed strange and incomprehensible. In her final weeks, she once again faced the challenge of existing in a world so far from the familiar comforts of her homeland. Vulnerable from illness and isolated by her coming demise, Pocahontas may have searched more ardently than ever for similarities between English and Powhatan culture that would comfort her in her final days. Perhaps she did find solace: her final words suggest

¹ Rountree, *Pocahontas, Powhatan, Opechancanough*, 186.

² Townsend, *Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma*, 175.

that she accepted her death bravely and thought to the future. Undoubtedly, however, she regretted the Powhatan family and friends she would never see again and worried about the fate of her little son. Although she had recognized the commonalities between English and Powhatan traditions, she had also witnessed the beginnings of English intolerance for cultural differences. Despite her natural joy for the survival of her son, she perhaps worried what kind of strange new world Thomas would live in.

Conclusion

In the years since her death, Pocahontas's story has been repeated many times. Myths have grown up around her life and she has been made into a founding mother in America's origin story. Even in light of the revisionist efforts of the last generation of scholars, attention remains fixated on the Pocahontas of Jamestown, Virginia. That, in a sense, perpetuates a stereotype about Native people by sequestering them in one particular locale. Seen in this light, Pocahontas's voyage to England takes on an even greater significance. Through it, we gain a window on one trans-Atlantic life and a glimpse into a much more complex world. It is the world of Donnacona's niece, of a Carib slave in Seville, of a woman named Elizabeth who traveled first to London and then to Bermuda. This interpretation of Pocahontas, in other words, is meant to reorient the way we think about Native presence—for it is global. Pocahontas and other Native men and women like her became explorers in their own right, sometimes under circumstances beyond their control. The question is what were these voyages like? What did encountering a new land and culture mean to them? How can we know?

The Pocahontas who came into view in my research was a woman whose experiences were not unique. Indeed, from the days of Columbus Native people from throughout the Americas were brought to Europe as curiosities, captives, diplomats, and spouses of Europeans. Each of these individuals encountered unfamiliar customs that they had to interpret through their Native cultural lenses. Like the famous European explorers of the Americas, these Natives explored Europe, negotiating cultures and people very different from

their own experiences. A common humanity and areas of cultural similarity helped these Natives to make sense of the new world of Europe, yet at the same time they undoubtedly noticed cultural differences that would only grow in later years. Pocahontas's story provides an opportunity to study one Native's experiences in depth, perhaps leading the way for future research into the lives of other trans-Atlantic Native individuals.

Pocahontas's experiences in London in the seventeenth century are particularly fascinating because she arrived in Europe at a time when differences between Natives and Europeans had not yet been solidified and codified. Although racialized notions of humanity were beginning to enter the minds of Europeans, they had not yet been fully articulated. Europeans were, however, quick to point out the cultural and religious differences between themselves and the Indians, noting the assumed superiority of their own customs and beliefs. Pocahontas may have been surprised, therefore, to discover in England that many of the English traditions had parallels within her own culture. Indeed, some English displays, like King James's welcome, she found less impressive than those of her people. Rather than being dazzled by the wealth, power, and cultural richness she saw in England, Pocahontas may have been more interested in noticing the strange similarities between seventeenth-century London and her homeland. Although she undoubtedly noticed the contrasts as well, she perhaps felt more invested in finding commonalities so that Powhatans and Englishmen could interact peacefully and lovingly, a goal that she had hoped to accomplish through her own marriage.

Reconstructing Pocahontas's experience in London proves challenging because of the scarcity of documents surrounding her voyage. To understand her experiences, I had to not only understand her Powhatan culture, but also have a background in the English culture she encountered in London. Only by knowing the customs, traditions, and events that she would

have participated in and witnessed in seventeenth-century London could I make judgments about how she would have interpreted those customs, traditions, and events. Activities in London like the Bonfire Night celebration are not mentioned by Englishmen who documented Pocahontas's travels. Yet, this cultural event did occur on November 5th, and Pocahontas undoubtedly attended it and made her own, unique observations. Although only the bare text of the Twelfth Night Masque survives, the splendors of that night can be revealed through looking at Jacobean courtly traditions of performance. Little is written of Pocahontas's death, yet through a careful reconstruction of seventeenth-century English healing practices and preparations for death, we can understand what she may have experienced in her final hours.

It is one thing to observe that Pocahontas went to Europe and to note the places that she visited and the events that she saw. It is still another thing to reconstruct *how* she experienced her journey and to comprehend the emotions she felt. That is what I set out to do in this thesis. In order to do so, I had to take an ethnohistoric approach to my research. I also had to consider that there are many ways of telling a story. By looking at historic events from outside of the Eurocentric frame typically used to view the past, I was able to gain valuable insights into the feelings of this Powhatan woman.¹ The Englishmen who documented Pocahontas had their own agendas when writing about Natives and over the course of my research I had to look between the lines to understand the significance that customs described by Europeans held for the Indians who practiced them. Through a careful analysis, I came to appreciate the cultural meanings behind events that the English could only describe as "savage." The torture of enemy captives, for example, takes on new meanings when we consider Native beliefs in community spiritual balance and seems less foreign and barbaric

¹ Philip J. Deloria, Indians in Unexpected Places, (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 7.

when we consider that Englishmen of the time also engaged in the public torture of enemies. While scholars frequently find themselves frustrated by a scarcity of written records, this obstacle to historical inquiry can be surmounted by utilizing interdisciplinary methods. In telling Pocahontas's story, I used ethnohistory and historical literature to go beyond the dry bones of historic fact to reveal the emotions and reactions of a woman who came face-to-face with a foreign culture.

To create a trans-Atlantic perspective, scholars must develop an intimate knowledge of multiple cultural viewpoints. In so doing, we develop a richer understanding of the encounter era by recognizing that cultural exchange and interpretations of the "other" were not unidirectional. Just as Europeans were pushed to create a greater sense of cultural self through encounters with Indians, Native people were also challenged to reexamine and rearticulate their cultural beliefs by comparing them with the traditions of Europe. If Pocahontas had survived, what might she have told her Powhatan relatives of the English? Her companion, Uttamatomakin was not impressed with the English. He came away from the voyage with a reaffirmed sense of his Powhatan self. Samuel Argall noted that he "rail[ed] against England, English people, and particularly his best friend Thomas Dale."¹ During the course of her voyage in England, did Pocahontas also feel a renewed sense of her Powhatan identity? How did her encounter with the customs of London change her understanding of her own culture?

Although Pocahontas may have seen similarities between the two cultures, following her death differences between the groups were emphasized, to the detriment of the Powhatans. Englishmen continued to insist upon the "rightness" of their own beliefs and in the process of

¹ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 160.

seeking land and converts, they disparaged Powhatan culture and traditions. Eventually, the differences led to armed conflict with the massacre of 1622, led by Opechancanough against the English.¹ The English retaliated and in the following years the peace established by Pocahontas's marriage dissolved into skirmishes, attacks, massacres, and counter-massacres. Eventually, the empire created by Powhatan was lost and the Natives of Virginia were forced onto reservations.² A new age of English colonialism began, one where other Natives would have to make sense of the foreign culture marching across their land in order to negotiate peace and to ensure cultural survival.

A painstaking reconstruction of Pocahontas's experiences in London elucidates a heretofore neglected part of her life story. Through reexamining her experiences we gain a greater appreciation and understanding of both Powhatan and English culture in the seventeenth century. Pocahontas, nurtured in the beliefs of her people, would have used her cultural perspective to interpret the new world she encountered. Through this encounter, she developed her own understanding of the English, drawing comparisons between English and Powhatan cultural traditions. She lived her own story, a story that was not fully documented or understood by the Englishmen who knew her. By examining her life and the lives of other trans-Atlantic Native individuals, we can develop a deeper understanding of the complexities of the encounters between Natives and newcomers and of the gradual construction of social difference. We can tell a tale previously left untold. We can discover, like the Native travelers, that new worlds were not only found in the Americas.

¹ Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 170.

² Townsend, Pocahontas and the Powhatan Dilemma, 177.

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