

*A beautiful Indian princess welcomed the English colonists to Jamestown in 1607 and fell in love with the dashing young Captain John Smith. When Smith was captured by her father, the great chief Powhatan, she risked her life to save her lover from a brutal execution. Thereafter a frequent visitor to the English settlement, she brought the colonists food and thwarted her father's plans to do them in. When Smith was injured in a gunpowder explosion and forced to return to England, Pocahontas pined away, but ultimately fell in love with another colonist, John Rolfe. She was baptized a Christian, took the name Rebecca (recalling the biblical matriarch who left her own people to marry Isaac and become the mother of a nation), and married Rolfe, with whom she had a son named Thomas. On a visit to England in 1616, she tragically died and was buried in a village church at Gravesend. But her legacy of love that triumphed over racial barriers lived on in the numerous Virginian descendants of her son.*

Almost every particular of this familiar story—or, rather, the two distinct tales of Pocahontas and Smith and Pocahontas and Rolfe that animators from Disney Studios recombined not long ago—is either incorrect or misleading.<sup>1</sup> References to a girl or woman named Pocahontas appear in the writings of at least four seventeenth-century English chroniclers: London courtier John Chamberlain, Virginia colonists William Strachey and Ralph Hamor, and, most importantly, the colony's sometime president and lifelong historian Smith.<sup>2</sup> Their works reveal that "Pocahontas" was a nickname, or perhaps even just a descriptive term, meaning something to the effect of "playful one" or "mischievous girl." It is possible, therefore, that not every Pocahontas they mention was the one who later became famous. That person's formal public name was Amonute; her personal, secret name, known only to her kin until revealed to a literate English audience, was Matoaka.<sup>3</sup>

Little is known about her life prior to the establishment of Jamestown. She was born in 1595 or 1596 as one of perhaps ten daughters and twenty sons of Powhatan, the *mamanatowick*, or paramount chief, who presided over the approximately thirty local communities and 15,000 people of Tsenacommacah, the "densely inhabited land" later called the Virginia Tidewater. Her mother was one of numerous wives of Powhatan, but the

older woman's identity is otherwise a mystery. The missing information is crucial for evaluating Pocahontas' status as a "princess," for among her people, as among most Native societies in eastern North America, political office descended in the female line. Thus neither Pocahontas nor her potential husband would have had any hereditary claim to Powhatan's chieftom; as Smith observed, "her marriage could no way have entitled [her spouse] by any right to the kingdom," which would descend to the *mamanatowick's* maternal nephews, not to his own children.<sup>4</sup> Whatever exalted social status she may have inherited through her mother's line, there is no particular reason to assume that she was her father's favorite. Indeed Strachey identified her youngest half-sister as the "great darling of the king's."<sup>5</sup>

There is no evidence that Pocahontas met Smith or any other English person before the end of 1607, when the captain's exploratory party was captured, he was brought to her father's village, and she supposedly rescued him from death. At the time, Pocahontas was a prepubescent girl of about twelve; Smith was a squat bearded man in his late twenties. Whether the Englishman's life was actually in danger on that occasion, whether Pocahontas acted on her own or on her father's or others' instructions, or even whether the girl intervened at all are matters of debate, in part because of the contradictory accounts Smith himself wrote. His early books give no hint that his life was in peril when he was held prisoner, but after Pocahontas became famous for her marriage to Rolfe he published increasingly elaborate stories of how "she hazarded the beating out of her own brains to save" his.<sup>6</sup> Still, the most likely interpretation of what happened is that the "execution" and "rescue" were part of an elaborately staged ceremony, designed to establish Powhatan's life-and-death authority over Smith, to incorporate the English as subordinate people within the *mamanatowick's* realm, and to make Pocahontas an intermediary between the two leaders and their communities.<sup>7</sup>

Such a relationship is suggested by the fact that Pocahontas subsequently appeared in Jamestown several times accompanying parties bearing food and messages from Powhatan to his English tributaries. These trips were not all business, however; Jamestown residents told tales of how a youngster wearing the non-garb traditional for children in her society would "get the boys forth with her into the market place and make

them wheel, falling on their hands turning their heels upwards, whom she would follow, and wheel her self naked as she was all the Fort over." *Au naturel* cartwheels notwithstanding, there was no romance between Smith and Pocahontas, who at best shared the fondness of an older man for a younger girl he later described as "the very nonpareil of [Powhatan's] kingdom."<sup>8</sup> After Smith's departure—more the result of a revolt against his leadership than of concern for his health, which could not have been improved by a long ocean voyage—she apparently went about her life much as she would have if the English had never arrived. In about 1610, at the age of fourteen or fifteen, she married a "private captain called Kocoum" and went to live with him in an outlying town in Powhatan's domain.<sup>9</sup>

Her relationship to John Rolfe began some three years later with another capture, this time of Pocahontas by the English. War between colonists and the Powhatans had broken out shortly after Smith's departure, largely because of incessant English demands for food tribute. Also in dispute were English claims to land in an area at the heart of Powhatan's chiefdom stretching fifty miles up the James River from Jamestown to the outpost of Henrico, which the colonists established in 1611. Following a policy of divide and rule, the English had made peace with one of the constituent elements of Powhatan's paramount chiefdom, the Patawomecks. In their country in April 1613, Englishman Samuel Argall convinced one of that nation's headmen to lure Pocahontas—who was on an extended visit to her father's erstwhile tributaries—on board his vessel.<sup>10</sup> The young captive spent most of the next year as a hostage at Jamestown, under the supervision of Deputy Governor Thomas Dale, and at Henrico, in the house of the Reverend Alexander Whitaker. During that period she received instruction—indoctrination might be a better word—in Christianity. Dale, promulgator of the colony's infamously draconian "Laws Divine, Moral and Martial," was hardly known for his light touch; during a previous term as governor he had sentenced some English wrongdoers "to be hanged, some burned, some to be broken upon wheels, others to be staked, and some to be shot to death."<sup>11</sup> Whitaker's approach may have been no more subtle. He wrote approvingly that "Sir Thomas Dale had labored a long time to ground in her" a rote knowledge

of the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments in English.<sup>12</sup>

During her captivity Pocahontas came to know John Rolfe, a twenty-eight-year-old bachelor who had recently shipped to England a trial sample of the tobacco he had been experimenting with since first importing seeds from the West Indies in 1611.<sup>13</sup> Rolfe became smitten with the then-eighteen-year-old woman, "to whom," he said, "my hearty and best thoughts are, and have for a long time been so entangled, and enthralled in so intricate a labyrinth, that I was even awearied to unwind myself thereout." Whether Pocahontas requited her suitor's love is unknown. Perhaps at first he simply represented a way out of the oppressive tutelage of Whitaker and Dale. In any event, what Rolfe feared might be only "the unbridled desire of carnal affection" was, he convinced himself, outweighed by the higher goals of the "good of this plantation for the honor of our country, for the glory of God for my own salvation and for the converting to the true knowledge of God and Jesus Christ, an unbelieving creature."<sup>14</sup>

In March 1614, as Rolfe sorted out his feelings, Dale took Pocahontas with him when he marched an army into the heart of Powhatan's domain, "burned . . . some forty houses, and . . . made freeboot and pillage" to demonstrate who was in charge. Despite this show of force, Powhatan balked at Dale's efforts to impose a peace treaty until, in the midst of negotiations, Rolfe wrote a letter to the governor confessing his attraction to Pocahontas and suggesting a diplomatic marriage to seal an alliance. Powhatan—who had several weeks earlier proposed "that his daughter should be [Dale's] child, and ever dwell with [him], desiring to be ever friends"—agreed to the match immediately. Pocahontas, having, according to Dale, "made some good progress" in her catechism, hastily received baptism, and within ten days the union was blessed with Anglican rites at Jamestown. No one seemed to worry about the bride's inconvenient previous marriage to Kocoum.<sup>15</sup>

Two years later, with Indians and English seemingly enjoying an age of peace and colonists madly planting Rolfe's tobacco everywhere, the couple and their infant son traveled to England. The family was accompanied by a man named Uttamatomakkin (whom English sources described as



Pocahontas during her visit to London, 1616.

Engraving by Simon van de Passe. National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

an adviser to her father) and perhaps ten other people from Tsenacommacah. Sometime after their arrival in June 1616, Smith (who Pocahontas had been told was dead) went to see her in her lodgings and wrote for her a letter of introduction to Queen Anne, in which he told the

rescue story in public for the first time.<sup>16</sup> In January 1617 the Indians were ceremonially received at court, where they were “graciously used” by King James I. They also sat “well placed” at a performance of a theatrical work by Ben Jonson, amid grumbling by some courtiers that Pocahontas was “no fair lady,” despite “her tricking up and high style and titles.” Two months later she succumbed to an unidentified ailment at Gravesend, as she prepared to travel home on a ship commanded by the same Samuel Argall who had captured her.<sup>17</sup>

Hopes for the kind of peaceful ethnic relations the Rolfe-Pocahontas marriage symbolized expired with her. Powhatan died in early 1618, leaving his paramount chieftainship to a series of elderly relatives. Effective leadership, however, passed long before his death to the Pamunkey chief Opechancanough and a charismatic religious figure named Nemattanew, or “Jack of the Feather,” who promised his followers that European musket shots would do them no harm. In November 1621, as the two were mobilizing forces to resist English expansionism, Nemattanew got into a scuffle with colonists who accused him of murdering an Englishman and took a fatal shot from one of the guns to which he claimed immunity. His movement lived on, however, and in March of the next year Opechancanough planned a series of carefully coordinated assaults that killed at least 330 English—perhaps one quarter of the colony’s population—in a single day. A decade of brutal retaliatory warfare ensued, until the exhausted English imposed peace terms.<sup>18</sup>

The conceptual distance the victors had traveled since the days of the Rolfe-Pocahontas marriage is perhaps best measured by comments made during the war by Virginia governor Francis Wyatt. “Our first work is expulsion of the savages to gain the free range of the country for increase of Cattle, swine, etc.,” he wrote. “It is infinitely better to have no heathen among us, who at best were but as thorns in our sides, than to be at peace and league with them.”<sup>19</sup> So things stood until 1644, when Opechancanough—reputedly 100 years old and unable to walk unassisted—was carried into the field on a litter to lead his people in a final desperate campaign against the English. In March 1646 English forces captured him and displayed him in a cage at Jamestown. Despite his disabilities and “eye-lids . . . so heavy that he could not see,” he defiantly protested the indignity until one of his guards shot him in the back.<sup>20</sup>



What might we make of these intertwined tales and their murderous end? Euro-Americans have usually faced west to focus on what the narratives mean for them and their own story. From this perspective, Pocahontas' main purpose was to make possible the survival of the Jamestown colony, and thus the future development of the United States. Her story conveys lessons about a road not taken, about an intercultural cooperation that should have been, about a Native American who not only welcomed colonizers with open arms but so thoroughly assimilated to their ways that she changed her name and her religion in order to become one with them. As a twentieth-century biographer put it, "Pocahontas did not share her people's hostility, and it is that fact that catapulted her into history . . . Encountering a new culture, she responded with curiosity and concern, and she accepted the potential for change and development within herself. She rose, surely and dramatically, above the ignorance and savagery of her people."<sup>21</sup> Opechancanough presumably did not.

An eastward-facing perspective on the limited documentary evidence about Pocahontas, however, suggests a very different meaning for her stories. What if we think of her not as the sexy savior of Jamestown but instead as "a young exile, who died at age twenty-two in a foreign country"?<sup>22</sup> Significantly, the only attempt to record Pocahontas' own words was made by that less-than-reliable source John Smith after his visit with her in England in 1616. When her old acquaintance first encountered her, "she turned about, obscured her face, as not seeming well contented." Hours later, after Smith had begun to doubt her ability even to speak English, Pocahontas finally

began to talk, and remembered me well what courtesies she had done, saying, "You did promise Powhatan [that] what was yours should be 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 do you," which though I [Smith] would have excused, I durst not allow of that title, because she was a king's daughter. With a well set countenance she said, "Were you not afraid to come into my father's country, and caused fear in him and all his people (but me) and fear you here I should call you father? I tell you then I will, and you shall call me

child, and so I will be for ever and ever your countryman. They did tell us always you were dead, and I knew no other till I came to Plymouth [England]; yet Powhatan did command Uttamatomakkin to seek you, and know the truth, because your countrymen will lie much."<sup>23</sup>

If Smith's version of Pocahontas' words is accurate, at least three powerful messages emerge. First is a pervasive tone of profound sadness—if not embittered disillusionment. This is not the song of an enlightened savage happy to live in civilization at last, but rather the lament of a "stranger" trapped by duty far from home in a world of congenial liars. Yet duty strongly emerges as the second message conveyed by Pocahontas' words, if they are her words. She conveys a firm sense of her social role and how she must play it. She defines that role neither as the Christian convert Rebecca nor as the wife of John Rolfe; instead, she is the one obligated to call Smith "father" and "be for ever and ever" his "countryman." In Native eastern North America, obligations were always supposed to be reciprocal. The third message, therefore, is the failure of Smith and his mendacious countrymen to uphold the standard of reciprocity. He refuses to let her call him "father" and has apparently forgotten his pledge to "Powhatan [that] what was yours should be his, and he the like to you."

So it seems plausible that, far from being a youthful rebel who defied her father's will to join the English invaders, Pocahontas was a dutiful child who fulfilled a very traditional function in Native politics and diplomacy.<sup>24</sup> Her role in whatever happened during Smith's 1608 captivity defined him as her adoptive parent, and thus also established kinship relations between him and her biological father and, presumably, her mother's clan as well. (There would be nothing odd about having two or more "fathers." Virginia Algonquian children probably used the same term of respect—which only imperfectly translates into English—to address both a male parent and his brothers.) Pocahontas' later marriage to Rolfe—a match both sides understood as an act of diplomatic alliance—vastly strengthened already existing connections. Through her, the English and the Powhatans became fictive kin, and the ceremonial, political, and economic basis for peace, as people of Tsenacommacah understood

that concept, became possible. Thus, a month after the marriage, Powhatan "inquire[d] how his brother Sir Thomas Dale fared, after that of his daughter's welfare, her marriage, his unknown son, and how they liked, lived, and loved together." When told all was well, "he laughed heartily, and said he was very glad of it."<sup>25</sup>

We need not idealize either the motives of Powhatan or the unanimity of his people to appreciate the genuine, if fragile, potential that Pocahontas' adoption and marriage represented or the ways in which that potential resonated with traditional Native practices. When Pocahontas took the name Rebecca and went to live among Europeans, she did so not to abandon her culture but to incorporate the English into her Native world, to make it possible for them to live in Indian country by Indian rules. In this light, it could not be more wrong to assert that she broke decisively with her people. To the contrary, Pocahontas played a familiar diplomatic role and may in fact have had very little choice in either her casting or her performance. Nor need we demonize the English to appreciate the tragedy that resulted from their failure to fulfill reciprocal obligations of kinship that they did not—or would not—understand. "Your king gave me nothing," Uttamatomakkin complained to Smith after an audience with James I that inexplicably included none of the gifts that any chief worthy of the name should have bestowed to display his power and largesse. Not surprisingly, when he returned to Tsenacommacah after Pocahontas' death, Powhatan's agent had little good to say about the English.<sup>26</sup> The story of Pocahontas, then, does represent a road of intercultural cooperation that tragically was not taken—but a road toward cooperation on Indian, rather than English, terms. To take that road, Smith and others in positions of authority over European colonists would have had to acknowledge that they were living in Indian country, that what they called "Virginia" was not theirs alone to govern. Whether that acknowledgment would have been enough—whether Powhatans and English could ever have found a way to share Tsenacommacah on mutually advantageous terms—will never be known. But Pocahontas' diplomatic marriage suggests that there was a genuine moment when an alternative history might have been made. Perhaps that is the deepest tragedy of her story.