

Lydia A. Cyrus

Dr. Squire

ENG 440

Film Analysis Revision

### Fabricated History and False Feminism:

#### Historical Inaccuracies and a False Sense of Feminism in Disney's Pocahontas

In 1995, following the hugely financial success of *The Lion King*, which earned Disney close to one billion in revenue, Walt Disney Studios was slated to release a slightly more experimental story (*The Lion King*). Previously, many of the feature-length films had been based on fairy tales and other fictional stories and characters. However, over a Thanksgiving dinner in 1990 director Mike Gabriel began thinking about the story of Pocahontas (Rebello 15). As the legend goes, Pocahontas was the daughter of a highly respected chief and saved the life of an English settler, John Smith, when her father sought out to kill him. Gabriel began setting to work to create the stage for Disney's first film featuring historical events and names and hoped to create a strong female lead in Pocahontas. The film would be the thirty-third feature length film from the studio and the first to feature a woman of color in the lead. The project had a lot of pressure to be a financial success after the booming success of *The Lion King* but also had the added pressure from director Gabriel to get the story right (Rebello 15).

The film centers on Pocahontas, the daughter of the powerful Indian chief, Powhatan. When settlers from the Virginia Company arrive their leader John Smith sees it as an adventure and soon he finds himself in the wild and comes across Pocahontas. The two quickly become fixated with each other despite the fact that Pocahontas's father wishes to see her married to another Native, Kucoum. During a skirmish between the settlers and the Natives, Kucoum is

accidentally shot and killed by one of the settler's guns. John Smith is then taken into custody and held prisoner where the Natives intend to execute him for his crimes. Before Chief Powhatan can deliver the crushing blow to John Smith, Pocahontas throws herself on top of Smith in an effort to save the man she has grown to love in a short time. Because of her actions to save Smith, the relationship between the Natives and the settlers become more tolerable. In the end, John Smith must return to England and offers Pocahontas a place on his ship but after much deliberating Pocahontas remains among her people and she solemnly watches John Smith sail away back to England.

### **Adapting the Myth:**

Creating *Pocahontas* required Disney to create a story they could market well. Like all films, *Pocahontas* saw a formation of ideas that changed as the process went on but the original story, based on myth, was imagined a new way. Theorist Linda Hutcheon writes that, "the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation" (Hutcheon 8). In the case of Disney's *Pocahontas* the story draws from two sources: history and myth. The history part comes from the well-documented existence of Chief Powhatan and one of his many daughters, Pocahontas, and their experiences with English settlers who came to Virginia around the early 1600s. The myth aspect comes from a long told story of Pocahontas saving the life of settler John Smith when he was allegedly in danger of being murdered by Chief Powhatan. John Smith's records as well as the records prior to Smith's published autobiography never mention Pocahontas saving his life. However, over the years the myth has grown leading people to believe that Pocahontas saved John Smith by throwing herself in front of him before her father could deliver a blow to Smith's head.

Gabriel hired Native American actors such as Irene Bedard and Russell Means, who had formerly been a member of American Indian Movement, to voice the characters of Chief Powhatan and Pocahontas, a descendant of the Powhatan tribe was hired as a consultant, and Gabriel paid visit to the Pamunkey Indian Reservation in Virginia to prepare for filming (Boothe). However, despite Disney's attempts to create a progressive film, the film washes away the crimes John Smith committed against the Natives and paints the picture of a heroic character, pushes the idea of colonial culture being the better culture, and it also leads viewers to believe that Pocahontas's happiness depends on the white man who has come to save her from her "savage" ways. These issues lead the movie to become less progressive and more of the traditional colonial narrative, like the story of Christopher Columbus, that belittles the conquered culture and praises the colonizer: Disney portrays Powhatan culture as oppressive and non-developed in order to justify John Smith's actions all while making Pocahontas dependent on the arrival and settlement of white culture.

Roy Disney, nephew of Walt Disney and the head of the company during the production of *Pocahontas* was quoted in the documentary *The Making of Pocahontas* as saying, "we have taken some liberties with it...we felt like the relationship that developed by way of a love story in addition to the relationship between two people from different civilizations just added an emotional impact to what finally happens" (Boothe). Despite the historical inaccuracies, including the addition of a romantic relationship between Smith and Pocahontas, the production of the film went on and maintained the idea of a love story between Smith and Pocahontas.

As Hutcheon mentions, the process of adapting a story to film involves some change. Disney takes the story of the historical Pocahontas and "reinterprets" her encounter with Smith by making her older and adding romance to the plot. Disney leaves out the fact that Pocahontas

was much younger in real life, ten or eleven to be exact, when the settlers arrived as well as the customs of the Powhatan people. They also romanticize the relationship between the settlers and the Natives. Hutcheon theorizes that adults “censor” adaptations to make them suitable for younger audiences, “or else they change the stories in the process of adapting them to make them appropriate for a different audience” (Hutcheon 118). Meaning, Disney had to make pivotal decisions about the best way to adapt the story of Pocahontas for their dominantly young audiences. This meant getting rid of aspects not suitable for an audience of children (such as the hostility between settlers and Natives) and adding elements to make the movie appeal more to that audience, such as a love story. Disney purposely choose a story about a Native American figure but ended up playing more into myth than history with their “reimagination” of the story of Pocahontas. Disney’s adaptation of the story of Pocahontas, while somewhat progressive, has some major historical inaccuracies as well as a false sense of feminism too.

### **The (Re-) imagination of John Smith:**

The challenge of creating an entertaining but also accurate portrayal of Pocahontas became apparent at the start of the project. Over the years leading up to the creation of the film, historians like Camille Townsend had debunked the myth that Pocahontas saved John Smith’s life and that there was ever romance between the two (Winesburg). Director Mike Gabriel stated in *The Art of Pocahontas*, “No one really knows what happened between Smith and Pocahontas” (Rebello 16). The Disney film shows John Smith and his fellow settlers coming to “The New World” in search of gold and riches. The New World is described as heaven by the Virginia Company to the men setting sail for it and Captain John Smith is revered as a legend among the men. Smith is depicted as a daring man setting out for his destiny alongside the other men traveling to America. Smith comes through the perils of the journey to Virginia as the

commanding voice guiding his fellow man through danger giving the audience a sense of courage and strength of character in Smith. These depictions would last throughout the film as Smith is seen as a savior rather than an invader.

Contrary to how the film portrays John Smith, historians (including non-Native American historians) paint a different picture of Smith. The Mattaponi tribe, one of the tribes that fell under Chief Powhatan's command, has preserved their oral history in the form of a book published in 2007 that serves as the Native American side to the story of Pocahontas. Dr. Linwood "Little Bear" Custalow and Angela L. "Silver Star" Daniel wrote:

When Smith went into any village, he would take four or five armed English colonists with him. They would traumatize the people with their weapons to the point that they would give Smith what he wanted to get him to leave. For instance, Smith would pretend to come into a village in a friendly manner. When he was in close proximity to the chief of the village, he would put his pistol to the chief's head, demanding a ransom of food in exchange for the chief's release. Smith and his men would proceed to take all the corn and food in the village. As they left, Smith would throw down a few blue beads, claiming to have "traded" with the Powhatan people. (Custalow and Daniel 14)

In the film, John Smith and his fellow settlers fear the natives from the start and sing about killing "savages" as they journey to the new world. Upon arriving, they venture into the wilderness armed with guns where Smith happens upon Pocahontas for the first time. The colonists seem unable to approach the natives without being armed indicating that they have no intention of being allies with them. The Powhatan people intended to "procure friendly relations

and trade” with the settlers yet are portrayed as being simply an enemy to the settlers and their European way of life (Custalow and Daniel 13).

Disney’s version of John Smith does not feature a man who would hold a gun to the head of the natives. Historically, Smith did a great amount of harm to the Powhatan people whether he meant to or not. His presence terrified the people of the Algonquin nation and even betrayed the trust of Chief Powhatan after he was accepted as one of Powhatan’s sons (Custalow and Daniel 18). Instead, he is seen as the savior sent to show the tribe the ways of the English.

After meeting Pocahontas, Smith is transfixed with the Native princess and her culture but desires to show Pocahontas the ways of the English in hopes of having her follow him home. When one of Smith’s men accidentally kills one of the natives, Kocoum, the Powhatan people take Smith hostage and intend to kill him. At the last minute, Pocahontas leaps to Smith’s rescue and prevents his death. However, the relationship between the settlers and the natives is now hostile and the opposing groups plan to go to war. Pocahontas attempts to soothe the tension between both groups and both parties settle. However, Governor Ratcliffe, another leader of the Virginia Company, becomes enraged and tries to kill Chief Powhatan but ends up wounding Smith instead, resulting in Smith’s and Ratcliffe’s return to England to seek medical treatment and trial. Smith wishes for Pocahontas to return with him but she decides to stay among her people but not before telling Smith he has her permission to return to the native land someday. Disney disregards the fact that Smith was a less than pleasant guest among the Powhatan and his departure back to England would have been a big relief for the Natives. Instead, Disney’s viewers are left with a feeling of hope that someday John Smith will return to Virginia and Pocahontas.

### **The Misrepresentation of Powhatan Culture:**

The first real exchange between Pocahontas and John Smith is an awkward conversation between two cultures: John Smith tries to shake her hand and she informs him of how the Powhatan say “hello” but then the John Smith dominates the exchange with his knowledge of London by insisting they shake hands as per the custom in London. Pocahontas says that she would like to see the streets of London and all of its wonders to which John Smith says, “You will.” Smith then tells Pocahontas of the plans to build a town like London in Virginia and says, “We’re going to build them here. We’ll show your people how to use this land properly,” insisting that the way the Powhatan live is improper. Disney presents the Powhatan as backwards and oppressive, misleading the audience to believe that John Smith is a good guy because he is saving Pocahontas by trying to integrate the English way of life with the Native way of life.

Disney presents English culture as the dominant and presents English culture as a commodity for the Natives to consume in exchange for their own way of life. Pocahontas, after deliberating between marrying Kucoum (as per her father’s wishes) and waiting for something new, immediately becomes infatuated with Smith. Scholar Michael Tratner wrote in an article featured in *Biography* that mercantilism, from the British perspective, served to benefit the settlers, “The power of wares to transform people is an important part of the Mercantile process: when a merchant brings a commodity into a foreign culture, he hopes that desires for that commodity will be so strong that the foreigners will lose control of their own values” (Tranter 129). In the case of *Pocahontas*, the commodity brought to the Powhatan princess is John Smith, his beliefs, and his advanced technology. Settlers would arrive in foreign territory with the hope that the foreign culture they came to would be put aside in exchange for goods the settlers brought.

One could argue that the arrival of John Smith is supposed to interest Pocahontas in forgetting her own cultures customs (and potential marriage partners) to run away with Smith and adopt his customs. In the film, Smith arguably embodies this sentiment: Smith goes so far as to call Pocahontas and her people “uncivilized,” insinuating that because their culture differs from his own that it is not a structured culture with its own customs. Powhatan culture had structure and customs followed by all tribe members. Disney shows this sense of a lack of structure from the beginning by having Pocahontas running wild on her own when children were almost constantly accompanied by elders within the tribe (Custalow and Daniel, 11).

Smith’s belief that his way of life is the better way of life upholds colonial views of colonized cultures: the white way is the better way. In Gail Tremblay’s article “Reflecting on Pocahontas,” Tremblay notes that the British referred to Pocahontas as “princess” because, “They didn’t speak enough of the local Algonquin language to pick up on the subtleties of the political system of the indigenous people they met, and so they guessed at things and what they saw was shaped by their own cultural expectations of ‘pagan’ society” (Tremblay). Disney upholds this belief by discrediting the Powhatan society and upholding the idea that because Powhatan culture is different that it is “pagan” or “uncivilized”. The simple fact that Disney considers Pocahontas a Disney Princess reflects the same views the new settlers had about the Natives: They did not understand the complexities or the structure of Powhatan culture and made assumptions based on what they knew of their own way of doing things.

Disney also misrepresents Chief Powhatan by portraying him as an oppressive father. In the film, Powhatan longs for his favored daughter to marry Kocoum but Pocahontas wishes for something else. This leads audiences to believe that Powhatan culture was patriarchal and Chief Powhatan was the center of these views. However, according to oral history of the Mattaponi,



women in the tribes—even the favored daughter of the high chief Powhatan—were permitted to marry whomever they chose. The real Pocahontas *did* marry Kocoum for love and they had a child together before relations between the natives and settlers fell apart (Custalow & Daniel 43). The idea that Pocahontas had no choice in her life (as Disney makes it seem) and had to follow her father's wishes is untrue and creates an image of Chief Powhatan that suggest he was apart of a patriarchal society. This further distorts the viewer's view of Chief Powhatan and his people and adds to the belief that the Native culture falls on the ugly side of the good culture/bad culture binary with the English culture coming out on top.

### **The False Sense of Feminism:**

Pocahontas differs from the standard “princess” narrative in Disney films greatly in that her story does not end with her being swept away by a prince. She is depicted as being a wild soul who takes a stand for her people in the end when she decides to stay with her tribe rather than go with John Smith back to England. Disney's filmmakers were eager to develop a historical narrative and were especially proud to have another woman of color in a feature film. However, the film features a false sense of feminism because her strength of character depends on her relationship with Smith. Pocahontas's beliefs and future are both challenged by the arrival of the settlers and suddenly Pocahontas desires to have a relationship with a white man. Derek T. Buescher and Kent A. Ono write in their publication *Civilized Colonialism: Pocahontas as Neocolonial Rhetoric* that “Feminism is used as a rhetorical trope in colonialist narratives to justify colonialist domination of native women and men” (Buescher and Ono 132). Disney's narrative of Pocahontas mirrors that of previous colonial narratives by using feminism as a guise for justification of John Smith's (and the other settler's) actions. The act of conquering a whole

civilization is justified when the viewer believes that the women of that civilization, even Pocahontas, are being oppressed.

Disney's promotion of *Pocahontas* as a feminist movie is degrading to the memory of the real Pocahontas and it romanticizes the events that took place between the Powhatan and the English. The physical features of the character of Pocahontas were based on white supermodel, Christy Turlington rather than a Native American girl (Edgerton and Jackson). The supervising animator for the production, Glenn Keane, admitted that a former studio chairman made him reshape Pocahontas' face to make her, "the finest creature the human race has to offer," suggesting that Anglicizing Pocahontas's features would make her a specimen of beauty. Instead of representing their leading lady as she would have looked the animators and consultants ended up mashing together a dark skin tone with mostly white features to create Pocahontas. Not only on the physical level, but on a mental level as well they take away Pocahontas's sense of identity altogether.

Further driving the false sense of feminism, after Pocahontas saves Smith she rationalizes her actions against her father by saying she "loves" Smith. She does not try to create peace in honor of the slain Kucoum who has died at the hands of the settlers nor does she act in the interest of helping her people: She acts in the interest of Smith. It is almost as if it never crosses Pocahontas' mind that she can act in her interest and her actions have little to do with her and more to do with her feelings towards a man. As scholar Lauren Dundes points out, "Pocahontas develops self-awareness and empowerment, learning that her actions can make a difference. But the goal of her actions is ultimately to save John Smith" (Dundes). Pocahontas is presented as feminist character but does not display feminist qualities; instead Disney makes her dependent—makes the dire situation between the Natives and settlers dependent—on John Smith. More

importantly, Disney raises the question of what choices a woman *can* make beyond who they marry: seemingly the only choice Pocahontas can make is whether or not she marries Kucoum. Therefore, *Pocahontas* is just like many previous films centering on a female character: the woman's way of life is directly dependent on the relationship she has with John Smith.

### **In the End:**

In the end, Disney sought to make a progress film and did create an environmentally friendly picture in the process. The film's themes of nature and preservation were prominent throughout the film. Many of the actors would go on to sing praise of the film, including Native American activist Russell Means who provided the voice of Chief Powhatan. Means thought the film was the "best" representation of Natives in film (Boothe). However, the Algonquin consultant brought in, Shirley "Little Dove" Custalow-McGowan would later admit that she was embarrassed to have her name attached to the production, "This is a nice film—if it didn't carry the name 'Pocahontas'... Disney promised me historical accuracy, but there will be a lot to correct when I go into the classrooms," (Dutka). As Custalow-McGowan put it, the film was an excellent production with a powerful ecocritical message and beautiful animation, but it is not a story about Pocahontas. Pocahontas was a young historical figure left to the mercy, like her people, of the English settlers coming to colonize a foreign land.

The true story of Pocahontas and her father Chief Powhatan exists in its truest form only in books by historians. Unfortunately, historical books do not have the marketing boost or massive following that Disney films do. Popular films reach a wider audience than history books. Arguably, the real story of Pocahontas could never be told in a setting for children or young viewers. Director Mike Gabriel must have known this notion when he decided to create a cross-cultural love story rather than a biopic about the Powhatan people and their endeavors with John

Smith and his men. Instead audiences will remember the images of Pocahontas and John Smith embracing as well as the songs in the film such as “Colors of the Wind” for many decades to come as the film continues to be considered a favorite among viewers of all ages.

Disney’s willingness to create a romanticized version of Pocahontas’s history becomes dangerous in that it causes audience members to view Native culture as oppressive as well as creates an idea that a young woman’s worth is based upon her relationship with a powerful man. Whether the real John Smith meant to be an unwelcoming force to the Powhatan people his actions are still felt today in the same way that Christopher Columbus’s actions are still felt in Native communities. Disney, in the past, had taken fairytales and stories and created wildly popular adaptations of those stories. However, in most cases, the Disney version of a story becomes the popular version—the version the most people are familiar with. Should this trend continue with the story of Pocahontas, movie goers will come to believe the story that John Smith and Pocahontas fell in love with each other but Pocahontas, in the end, chose her people over Smith creating a solemn love story that will last for ages.

## Works Cited

- Buescher, Derek, and Ono, Kent. "Civilized Colonialism: Pocahontas as Neocolonial Rhetoric." *Women's Studies in Communications*, Volume 19, Issue 2, 1996, 127-153.
- Custalow, Linwood, and Daniel, Angela. *The True Story of Pocahontas: The Other Side of History*. Fulcrum Publishing, 2007.
- Dutka, Elaine. "Disney's History Lesson: 'Pocahontas' Has Its Share of Supporters, Detractors." *Los Angeles Times*, 9 Feb. 1995.
- Dundes, Lauren. "Disney's Modern Heroine Pocahontas: Revealing Age-old Gender Stereotypes and Role Discontinuity Under a Façade of Liberation." *Social Science Journal*, Volume 38, Issue 3, 2001, 353-356.
- Edgerton, Gary and Jackson, Kathy. "Redesigning Pocahontas." *Journal of Popular Film & Television*, Volume 24, Issue 2, 1996, 90-99.
- Hutcheon, Linda and O'Flynn, Siobhan. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, 2006.
- Kim, Albert. "A Whole New World." *Entertainment Weekly*, Issue 280, 1995, 22-26.
- "The Lion King." *BoxOfficeMojo*, 16 Nov. 2016,  
[www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=pocahontas.htm](http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=pocahontas.htm)
- The Making of Pocahontas*. Directed by Dan Boothe, The Wrightwood Group, 1995.
- Pocahontas*. Directed by Mike Gabriel and Eric Goldberg, performances by Irene Bedard, Mel Gibson, David Ogden Stiers, Russell Means, and Christian Bale, Walt Disney Pictures, 1995.
- Rebello, Stephen. *The Art of Pocahontas*. Hyperion, 1995.

- Tranter, Michael. "Translating Values: Mercantilism and the Many 'Biographies' of Pocahontas." *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*, Volume 32, Issue 1, 2009, 128-136.
- Tremblay, Gail. "Reflecting on Pocahontas." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, Volume 23, Issue 2, 2002, 121-124.
- Wineburg, Sam and Martin, Daisy. "Did Pocahontas Rescue John Smith?" *Reading Like a Historian: Teaching Literacy in Middle and High School History Classrooms*. Columbia University, 2011.