

Pocahontas: The Eco-Feminist Warrior

As the princess stereotype shifts from victim to hero, Walt Disney's *Pocahontas* demonstrates how her role as a princess of color serves a greater purpose to the relationship of women and nature. The argument of man overpowering nature, animals, and women is clearly identified within Pocahontas through the male characters' destruction and ownership over land that does not belong to them. The characters of Pocahontas illustrate eco-critical views and themes of eco-feminism through the embodiment of the connected world, human-animal relationships, and the equal treatment of females and nature. The film cohesively displays the clear connections of male dominance not only within human societal order, but in relation to the natural structure of the environment. Pocahontas, along with the other Native American women in the tribe, is not allowed to make her own decisions, rather must follow a strict patriarchal pattern among her own people. As an associated victim to the land and animals of the male dominance throughout the film because of her position as an indigenous princess, Pocahontas utilizes this role as human and victim in order to form an understanding between the two groups of people for the sake of peace.

The conflict throughout the movie Pocahontas involves the destruction and colonization of Native land by British soldiers. John Ratcliffe serves as the lead conspirator. During the scene where Ratcliffe and his appointed colonial men are singing "Mine, Mine, Mine," they are displayed digging numerous holes, shooting down trees with a cannon, and using heavy explosives in order to retrieve his desired gold. A line in the song stating, "mine, boys, mine ev'ry mountain," suggests ironic word play on the term "mine." Ratcliffe not only is instructing the men to mine for gold, but also placing ownership over the land and mountains. The immediate effect this invasion has on the natural surroundings directly correlates to how

damaging the men's power can be when not restrained. Marianne Dekoven states, "The turn toward animals is also based on a more broadly generalizing premise: the idea, or conviction, that the human species is destroying, and perhaps has irretrievably destroyed the planet" (367). With this quote, Dekoven supports the visual argument displayed throughout *Pocahontas* that their lust to destroy and take what does not belong to them can only be nothing but detrimental to the environment. This destruction that takes place throughout the musical scene entails disregard for the land and nature inhabiting the area through the digging of holes, disruption of ground, and tree cutting.

Although Ratcliffe and the colonial men are acting dangerously out of greed, Powhatan and his tribe also exhibit brutish thoughts and intent to harm in order to remain in power. Both groups of men are willing to injure, even kill in order to claim the environment around them as their own. The Native American men show what Dekoven states as anthropocentrism when they associate the colonial men as non-humans stating, "These beasts invade our shores," and also calling them, "ravenous wolves." By using these terms, they are creating these men as lesser beings to them and not equal. Not only do the Native Americans use this device, but the colonists also deem their enemies as "savages", "vermin", "heathens", throughout their songs and conversation. Dekoven states, "A primary approach to the study of animal representation takes as its object the ways in which literary animals are used to reinforce the denigration of subjugated people" (363). We see within the arrival scenes when these terms are used, both groups do not understand nor accept the other. Dekoven characterizes anthropomorphism in contrast to anthropocentrism by the interactions humans have with animals and how they are seen. By using anthropocentric views in order to classify their enemies as "other", both groups of men are failing to see emotions or thought processes capable enough to consider themselves

as equal human beings. Dekoven describes an opposite interaction as anthropomorphism (366) which would allow the two groups to see each other's intelligence and would be able to communicate. Because the two groups of men fail to acknowledge themselves as equals, they become at war over land ownership leaving nature as the primary victim.

Although John Smith is not directly involved in the musical scene, the character supplies specific lines of dominance pertaining to the land and Native Americans while exploring the woods. As the scenes switch between the colony, to village, into Smith's excursions he states, "In a land I can claim, a land I can tame." Smith refers to the wildness of the land and seeks to gain ownership for himself over something that has been free. He further goes on to claim, "A man can be bold, it all can be sold." His plans of domination are an act of greed, much like Ratcliffe's underlying motives. The word choices of "man" and "bold", also depict his feelings of who should be in control, also what characteristics it will take in order to obtain this power. Smith, much like the colonial men and Native Americans, is displaying anthropocentric views about his surroundings. Explained by Jacques Derrida, "As a consequence, the human being continues to be thought as fundamentally different to and privileged over other entities" (30). By considering himself, along with his fellow colonists the central focus, Smith is unable to consider other lives that will be affected on his quest for land domination.

We are shown within the film that Pocahontas belongs to a village that follows a strong patriarchal societal structure in which herself, along with the rest of the women, do not have much control over their "paths". Similar to the powerless state of the land at this dire time, the women of the tribe do not have the power to make their own choices on how their life will also be impacted. When first shown the village of Powhatan's tribe, the women are seen working the fields and tending to children. Pocahontas is not pictured because she occupies most of her time

in the forest with her animal companions, Meeko a raccoon and Flit a hummingbird, against their tribal order. Her abject actions against the patriarchal structure of the village can be explained through the dominant role her father plays in her life decisions and arranging her marriage without her consent. Emily Gaarder states, “Experiences of hierarchal domination may cause women to feel more connected to nature and animals” (57). When her father returns from battle, he seeks to retain his position of power over Pocahontas by declaring her engagement to Kocoum. “With him (Kocoum) you will be safe from harm,” Powhatan pleads with Pocahontas. As he further asserts her role as a woman in the tribe, Powhatan begins to correlate her life as a woman to natural surroundings. Powhatan states, “You are the daughter of the chief, it is time to take your place among our people. Even the wild mountain stream must someday join the big river.” Powhatan’s position of power within the hetero-patriarchal structured village is referred to as natural and Pocahontas is expected to assume her role among the people as a wife to the most favored warrior against her will, similar to the controlled order that he sees throughout nature. According to Greta Gaard, the eco-feminist theory’s role is to understand the dominant understandings over women and nature (39). When looking closely at how the two compare, Pocahontas and the land are equally controlled by the men in power and both are conflicted by the actions that are taking place over them throughout the film.

As previously stated, Pocahontas is seen throughout the entirety of the movie relying on nature and her animal companions, rather than the humans around her for support and comfort. Early in the film, when she is presented with her father’s return and news that he has decided to arrange a marriage between herself and Kocoum because of his achievements in the recent battle she becomes overwhelmed with feeling powerless. As Powhatan sells Pocahontas the marriage agreement, she is reluctant not only because he is so “serious”, but because this was not a

decision that she was able to make on her own in order to follow her perceived destiny that she so strongly believed in. Included within Gaarder's argument is the idea stating,

“Feminists—indeed most women—are acutely aware of what it feels like to have one's opinion ignored, trivialized, rendered unimportant. Perhaps this experience has awakened their sensitivity to the fact that other marginalized groups—including animals—have trouble getting their viewpoints heard” (59).

Not only will Pocahontas feel closer to nature, but will also understand more thoroughly the mistreatment and dominance both have suffered due to gender differences in a patriarchal structure.

Powhatan and Pocahontas' conversation leads into the musical number that visually connects Pocahontas' role as a Disney princess with the natural surroundings through the embodiment of restrained freedom contrasted with natural order. During the song, “Just Around the River Bend”, Pocahontas attempts to escape the decision her father made for her and turns to nature for comfort about her life path he has chosen for her. Within the song, she questions her “place” in life and envies the freeness of nature. Throughout the song, there are images of animals in peaceful states, also a couple of beavers swimming freely alongside her canoe. She is making claims within the lyrics that suggest she is contained within her decisions and will never know what awaits her on the other side of walls, waterfalls, and corners because she is not able to break free. The line, “Can I ignore that sound of distant drumming?” suggests that she does not want to align with her cultures' order and marry Kocoum. She goes on to state, “For a handsome sturdy husband, who builds handsome sturdy walls” in order to affirm the biological differences between women and men. Gaarder states, “Namely, that men may be attracted to hunting because of their need to provide for the family and show masculine prowess, and women

may be attached to animals due to maternal instincts” (58-59). Pocahontas is not only stating her distaste for traditional rules of matrimony, but also deriving the societal differences between the roles of men and women. The drumming also entails that she is against the recent wars that her people are waging, both prior to and now with the colonists. At the end of the song, she is confronted with a physical representation of two paths she can take in her life represented by river channels. She states in the song, “Should I chose the smoothest course, steady as the beating drum,” as she stares at the calmly flowing river path.

After peering into her reflection in the water unsatisfied, she returns her focus back to the two river channels wondering, “Or do you still wait for me, Dream Giver just around the river bend.” Once the song concludes, Pocahontas is seen rowing her canoe down the bumpy, curvy river path simulating that she has made the choice for herself against her father’s hetero-patriarchal rules. Emily Gaarder’s argument supports why Pocahontas chooses to turn to her natural surroundings for comfort stating how women are naturally more connecting to nature than men. Gaarder claims that most women recognize and understand what it is like when their opinions or needs are being heard, often deemed unimportant (58). According to Gaarder, Pocahontas’ state of mind throughout this scene would be a total loss of control and freedom. At this moment, a clear connection has been made between Pocahontas and the land through powerless and loss of voice. She feels that her opinions do not matter and it is part of societal order and that her right to make choices are being stripped away, much like the rights of the land Ratcliffe is seeking dominance over.

This relationship between women and the natural surroundings becomes a significant pattern that consistently resurfaces throughout *Pocahontas*. A main character throughout the film that plays a large role in combining these two parties together and creating a stronger connection is

Grandmother Willow. She is a guiding figure in Pocahontas' life that is essentially a woman's spirit grounded into the trunk of a willow tree. Grandmother Willow is introduced when Pocahontas seeks advice about her conflicting emotions toward the recent engagement to Kocoum. Grandmother Willow states, "All around you are spirits child. They live in the Earth, water, and sky. If you listen they will guide you." With this statement, Grandmother Willow is suggesting that not only will the natural surroundings and animals of Earth serve as a comforting companion, but other elements as well will understand and assist in her journey for self-actualization. Aiding Grandmother Willow's wisdom is her dissatisfied emotions about serious men and restrictive lifestyles against the natural order. Greta Gaard explains the relationship between casting the nurturing Grandmother figure as a tree as appropriate. Gaard states, "Biological determinism includes various arguments, from physical or hormonal differences to differing evolutionary pressures. All suggest that sex differences determine certain behaviors and roles in society" (70). Gaard's findings support why women, especially pertaining to the role of Grandmother Willow being a female, are inclined genetically to be more connected with nature and will genetically have a maternal instinct towards living beings to assume the role of nurturer.

She continues on to further state, "The fact that some women have the reproductive capacity to become mothers has led to a popular perception that women are natural caretakers of the earth and its creatures" (70). Gaard defines why not only Pocahontas, but women in general are biologically the determined gender to relate clearer with nature and animals, also inheriting motherly instincts. By creating a mixture of woman and tree, *Pocahontas* utilizes the natural elements of Grandmother Willow's character to convey this hybrid of woman and nature, along with why Pocahontas looks to her for guidance. As the willow tree is known to be physically

grounded, along with sheltering leaves and stems, it is a fitting representation of a caring grandmother offering wisdom.

Grandmother Willow does not just offer advice, but is also a part of the natural beings that support Pocahontas' longing to be free. When Pocahontas explains to Grandmother Willow that she is having dreams and doubts, she is open to listening and understanding. Unlike Powhatan, Grandmother Willow suggests, "listens to her heart, you will understand" further agreeing that Pocahontas should be able to have the opportunity to choose her own path. Upon their meeting in the forest, Grandmother Willow states that Pocahontas' mother also had come to her about doubts and questions of the same nature. We notice that Grandmother Willow has a shaped face inside the trunk of a willow tree, however there is no definitive character for Pocahontas' mother. The argument that tribal members, or specifically women of the tribe transform into natural elements after life could be made through these two characters. When her mother is mentioned throughout the movie, a swirl of wind with brightly colored leaves swoop around Pocahontas. This can be argued to be how her mother is represented in her afterlife. Gaarder states, "Some of these cultural-spiritual feminists argue that there are essential connections embedded in women's bodies that make their relationship to the natural world unique" (58). Because the spirits of these women are so grounded in these natural elements, a clearer connection can be drawn to women and nature.

Pocahontas clearly displays strong animal relationships throughout the film, but this behavior is rarely seen in most Disney princesses. The connection that Pocahontas maintains to her animal companions, along with her willingness to fight for the good of the land stems from the role of an indigenous princess. Against the typical structure of a Disney film, it is noticed throughout *Pocahontas* a level of anthropomorphism and supporting characters being animals.

Meeko and Flit play a large role as Pocahontas' friends, as well as equal counterparts. Among her central companions are also animals that serve a greater purpose in the musical scene, "Colors of the Wind" in order to assist Pocahontas in demonstrating to John the importance of living beings that are "non-human". The difference between the animal characters in Pocahontas and previous Disney films are the importance they hold and ways in which they are utilized. Megan Condis describes this class system to be a necessity in the earlier films in order to develop a superiority for the feminine characters and display the animal counterparts in a position of peasantry to create this separation. After looking closely into the animal relationships of the original princesses, Condis states, "The first three Disney Princess films establish a hierarchy that separates the human princess characters from their animal helpers" (42). This type of relationship is also noticed through Ratcliffe and his dog Percy. Percy is treated like a pet, not a friend. Ratcliffe is not the primary care taker and only considers him as property that is to be maintained for show. Exemplified by his daily bathes with cherries, he is showered with objects and not familial love that Pocahontas provides to Meeko and Flit.

As Pocahontas is the first Indigenous princess, she faces oppression from both colonialism and gender inequality. Condis states that there is a shift in perspective when princesses of color were developed to show not only there is a level playing field among the animals and princess, but also define the control that man gains over both groups (40). Man, specifically British settlers, are attempting to claim the Native Americans' land in search of gold and destroy the environment in the process. This sense of entitlement to what is not theirs speaks to Condis' argument about the "blurred lines" (40) of relationship between animals and princesses of color. Pocahontas can relate further to how the British settlers are overpowering the land and animals that inhabit the area because she is not viewing them as beneath her. In

fact, according to Condis, “Rather than contrasting sharply against their fellow animals, princesses of color were often depicted as being of equal stature with their animal friends or even as having beast-like traits themselves” (40). Pertaining to the act of colonization, Pocahontas has more than enough reasons to identify equally with her animal counterparts throughout the movie because they are all seen as the “other” in the eyes of the British settlers.

When John ventures away from camp in attempts to explore the land, he has caught the eye of a hidden Pocahontas as she crouches behind the bushes both curious and fearful of this stranger in her home territory. Within this scene in the forest, Pocahontas displays the mentioned characteristics of “anthropomorphism” upon when first laying eyes on the unfamiliar John Smith and experiences the identification of emotion and thought process as described previously by Dekoven (366). Pocahontas is crouched down behind the bushes animalistic like, as she stares at the cracker exchange between Meeko and John. Once compassion is exhibited for the hungry animal, John is now exhibiting anthropomorphism as described by Dekoven. Not only John, but Pocahontas is also capable of determining this strange figure as non-threatening and having emotions. This display of double anthropomorphism within this scene is supported by Dekoven by stating, “Strictures against sentimentality that forbid empathy for other animals and that often accompany charges of anthropomorphism are also more and more being replaced by an awareness of the intricate and massive interdependence between humans and other animals” (363). The interaction that Pocahontas witnesses between John and Meeko reassures her that the unfamiliar being is no longer dangerous and capable of forming a connection to animals, instead of immediately attacking her animal companion.

The scene between Smith and Meeko in the forest is not the only example of anthropomorphism depicted in *Pocahontas*. John Smith’s character is soon confronted with

Pocahontas herself during one of his hikes in the forest. During their actual meeting scene, even though he had previously viewed Native Americans as “savages” and people that he can “tame”, John soon reaches a vulnerable moment of anthropomorphism in which he sees Pocahontas as a human. He is skeptical and defensive of Pocahontas at first glance due to his opinions of her culture. John also does not recognize her as human because of her animalistic behavior such as the language barrier and crawling, cat like motions across the rocks in the river, which insists him to draw his weapon. However, Pocahontas and John interact in an anthropomorphic “gaze” as described by Dekoven, which further signifies that they are on equal grounds, a moment that he sees her as more than property or collateral damage of their British invasion. Dekoven claims, “Suddenly or eventually, one can experience a shift in perspective, and these animals become visible apart from our myriad learned projections onto them. Moreover, they return the gaze of the knowing looker” (366). Once the two characters have interacted in what Dekoven claims as a “gaze”, they are now able to better understand each other. Through this newly formed common understanding, Pocahontas is now in the position to further educate John on the harm his people are causing to the land through their greed allowing herself to become a bridge of communication between man and nature.

One of the songs from the film that is most commonly recognized is, “Colors of the Wind.” Despite the beautiful voice and artwork displayed in the background during this musical scene, the lyrics have a deeper meaning than surface level cartoon fantasy. After a close examination of the lines themselves and the details of the scene portrayed in the film, there are numerous examples to support an eco-critical theme is at play. Although the song itself along with the animals shown throughout the number are calm, the lyrics and visuals suggests the clear dominance that man seek to gain over nature without understanding the living beings that are

affected. Pocahontas states in the intro to the song, “Still I cannot see, how the savage one is me”, as she returns John Smith’s gun back to him as a motion for surrender. From the beginning, this image and lyric suggests that the British settlers are creating more damage and acting more “savage” like than the Native Americans who are considered to be the problem. She continues on to state, “How can there be so much that you don’t know?” This statement speaks to his anthropocentric views about the world, believing that man is the central focus and holding the highest importance above everything. Following Pocahontas as she turns to walk away is the swirl of leaves in the wind, as declared to be her mother affirming that this is her destined path to be the voice of the land and animals. “But I know every rock and tree and creature has a life, has a spirit, has a name,” Pocahontas claims early in the song. According to Megan Condis, “The princesses of color might be lovely and good at heart, but they are shown to be closer to expressing their animal natures than white women are” (41). Because Pocahontas has a closeness with the animals and environment that surrounds them, she is capable of bringing John into their world in order for him to understand they are also important.

Pocahontas is striving to connect John with the lives of the animals by explaining their lives through an established anthropomorphic lens. As Dekoven has claimed, anthropomorphism is depicted as seeing emotions or thoughts within an animal (363). This anthropomorphic interaction, much like the one John previously shared with Pocahontas, assists him in understanding the damage his people are inflicting on the lives of the animals that Pocahontas introduces him to. As the opening continues with the image of animal footprints leading into a cave with a family of bears, John seems fearful and immediately retreats back to defensive behavior by drawing his weapon on the bear. Pocahontas calmly lowers the gun and states, “You think the only people who are people, are the people who look and think like you. But if you

walk the footsteps of a stranger, you'll learn things you never knew you never knew." As the scene displays footsteps leading into the cave of cubs, Pocahontas is making the claim that John's unwillingness to understand lives outside of his own is selfish and dangerous to other animal beings with families. Condis states, "Her theme song, "Colors of the Wind," in which she evokes her connection to the wolf, the grinning bobcat, the heron, and the otter (who she calls "my friends"), emphasizes this connection. She even brings John to see a family of bears, implying to him that, to her, animals and people are equally deserving of respect and even familial love" (48). Because Pocahontas is bringing John into their world, she is using Dekoven's anthropomorphism to her advantage in order to teach him that he and the animals are more alike than he may realize in terms of emotions and individual personalities. This strategy speaks to her ability to communicate with both worlds in order to stop the land domination and destruction.

Pocahontas continues into the chorus as she states, "Have you ever heard the wolf cry to the blue corn moon, or asked the grinning bobcat why he grinned?" These lyrics personify the animals, further allowing the viewers and John to see humanistic qualities and emotions within them as preserved by anthropomorphism (Dekoven 366). Visually, it is also drawn within the stars and shaped through the trees a grinning bobcat when first mentioned. Pocahontas goes on to state, "Can you sing with all the voices of the mountain? Can you paint with all the colors of the wind?" As she sings these lyrics, her face is being painted into the sky. This type of fluidity with the Earth supports not only Pocahontas', but Grandmother Willow and her mother's connection with the natural elements of the Earth. Asking these questions of the natural scenery with human characteristics also brings equality to themselves and their surroundings throughout the song through personification.

Pocahontas is not only trying to convince John to identify with the animals on the element of personality and equality, but is bringing his intentions of dominance and power into the song as well. Through the lyrics, “Come run the hidden pine trails of the forest, come taste the sun-sweet berries of the earth. Come roll in all the riches all around you, and for once, never wonder what they’re worth.” She is making the argument that you can appreciate and experience nature, without destroying its beauty or trying to distribute it for a price. Gaard states, “Indigenous women called attention to the colonialism and environmental racism that legitimates hazardous waste, military bomb tests, coal mining, nuclear storage, hydropower construction, and PCB contamination on reservation lands” (31). According to Gaard, the greed and destruction of Earth is being recognized by women in an attempt to preserve these natural resources. Pocahontas’ role throughout the film as an indigenous princess naturally is a protector of the animals and land. This destruction and disregard for repercussions as stated by Gaard is an expected reaction we notice from Pocahontas in an attempt to legitimize the harm these men are causing. She is essentially striving to reach this goal by educating John through pure exemplification of the victims. By explicitly stating that John can experience nature without trying to own or profit from it, Pocahontas is speaking for the voiceless land that falls victim to John Ratcliffe’s plan to mine for gold.

Pocahontas then goes on to support this argument by suggesting the endless possibilities and lives ended due to these acts by stating, “How high does the sycamore grow? If you cut it down, then you’ll never know.” The two are also symbolically pictured throughout the musical number running with deer legs and transforming from eagle to their natural human selves. Using this type of personification in the background of the lyrics only further signifies their connection to the animals, solidifying John’s understanding of anthropomorphism. Toward the closing lines

of the song she states, “Whether we are white or copper skinned”. Pocahontas is bringing their racial differences into question with this line, while also suggesting that all living creatures belong to the earth and can cohesively live together without dominating one another. Visually, it is shown as the song comes to a close that all of her effort will go unnoticed from a reality stand point. As the screen pans out to display John’s gun in the corner which ultimately resembles his position of power over Pocahontas and nature. Condis’ article states, “An account of the princesses requires an intersectional approach with a perspective on how constructions of gender, race, and class intersect and dissolve in the play between the categories of the human and the animal” (40). Condis supports the statement white or copper skinned as necessary because of the inferiority and inequality she faces as an indigenous princess. The Disney film includes a ‘Happily Ever After Trope’ for which he does not use his gun for battle, yet stands with Pocahontas for peace. However, this is a powerful scene in terms of eco-criticism due to the known facts of how dominant man has been over women and land throughout history.

Over the course of Walt Disney’s earlier films, the princesses were idolized by little girls while treating their animal companions as background, supporting characters on the journey to assist in the ‘Happily Ever After’ ending we are all too familiar with. As this role of Disney princess began to shift with the introduction of princesses of color, animals were no longer thought of as lesser value or abstract characters. *Pocahontas* brought forth a complex character of independence that defied the stereotypical role of princess. Pocahontas’ actions to strive to create peace among her people and the colonial men for the sake of the land, while also seeking to discover her life path serves as a significantly important role model in connection to eco-feminist ideology. Unlike previous Disney films, her animal sidekicks are more than mere slaves that do her chores and assisting her with the fairytale wedding. In her quests, her strong

relationships to the animals and nature that surrounds her serves a greater purpose in establishing John's understanding to the natural world. As Pocahontas instills John with a better understanding of the Earth outside of greed and his own anthropocentric views, she is then capable of becoming a self-actualized woman finding her own Happily Ever After.

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