

Cierra

Frontiers & Borderlands/ pre-req

Was the Union between John Rolfe and Pocahontas true love or a political strategy?

Pocahontas is one of the most well known figures in American history. She is known for being one of the very first Native American women to marry an Englishman. But how did she come about marrying him in the first place? Was she a traitor to her people or was her stay with the English forced? There are those who feel she had a strong liking to the English and did not mind leaving her Powhatan Indian culture behind. Then there are those who feel that she had no choice because she was kidnapped against her will. Since both views about Pocahontas' marriage to Rolfe are strong, my focus will be to look further into her capture and see if the marriage was based on love. Or, was it simply a political strategy on the part of the English to take over what is now the state of Virginia.

The Disney movie "Pocahontas" is one of the most recent popular versions of the story that tells of Pocahontas' encounter with the English. The movie portrays a tale of love at first sight for Pocahontas and John Smith. The movie implies that Pocahontas and Smith tried to settle matters between the two cultures, and in doing so, they fell in love with each other. Basically, in the movie, the English and Indians were equally portrayed as "bad guys" versus Pocahontas and Smith as the "good guys".

My research is based on three books. The first is Pocahontas by Grace Steele Woodward. Woodward portrays Pocahontas as an "exceptional" Indian who wanted to leave her culture because the Indians were savages. The second book I researched is, Pocahontas: The Life and Legend by Frances Mossiker. Mossiker does not choose sides; he does not portray Pocahontas as a traitor or victim. He simply explains how she was caught in the middle of the English and the Indians' differences and how it affected her. The third is Pocahontas and Her World by Philip Barbour. Barbour's book offers a different interpretation from Woodward's. Barbour feels Pocahontas was a victim and the English were savages. I used these three books to examine the movie "Pocahontas" to find out if what the movie portrays of her encounter with the English is true.

Based on my research, I am more convinced that Pocahontas did not, in any way, push herself on the Englishmen and fall in love at first sight with any of them. The movie does not portray the truth of her encounter with the English and her love life. First, the movie does not portray the right man; Pocahontas did not have a relationship with John Smith. In reality, She was married to Smith's shipmate, John Rolfe. And even her relationship with Rolfe was not mutual because as I will later explain, he decides to marry her after she is stripped of her Indian ways. Second, Pocahontas was kidnapped which obviously shows she did not push herself on them. Pocahontas was a young Indian girl trapped in the middle of a battle between the Powhatan Indians and the English over Jamestown and unfortunately, she was used by the English to take over Indian Territory.

Arrival of the English-

Before Werawocomoco (now Jamestown, Virginia) was taken over by the English, an Indian tribe called the Powhatans ruled it. The three books and movie agree on this. The movie clearly shows the English were voyaging on to land that was not theirs and they were doing so in hope that they would get rich off of it. This was not an unreasonable belief. According to Mossiker, Jamestown was always a land of useful resources to survive. Its soil was excellent to plant food on. "Werowocomoco had some two hundred cultivated acres, flourishing fields of corn and beans, well tended gardens of tobacco, pumpkins, gourds, and sunflowers." (Mossiker, Page 77) When the English arrived in 1607, they recognized that as well.

The movie portrays both the Indians and English as selfish and unsympathetic people. For example, the English just wanted "gold", the tobacco, and did not care about anything else and this is supported with the three books I read. On the other hand, they feel different about the Indians, in particular, Woodward's argument.

One of the biggest myths of the Woodward Pocahontas story is that the Indians were savages. For Woodward this stems from John Smith supposedly getting attacked by the Powhatans after coming onto their land and Pocahontas saving him. Woodward states, "Powhatans were savages. Pocahontas was an exception. She had kind heart and ran to Smith before they were going to kill him." (Woodward, page 15) What Woodward states is irrelevant because as far as John Smith being captured by the Powhatans is unproven. Mossiker states that

Smith did keep journals, but he did not write anything about being threatened by the Powhatans or saved by his daughter, but he did know Pocahontas from his stay there. “Smith’s writings of his experiences in Virginia made no mention of having been threatened by Powhatan or saved by the daughter...” (Mossiker, page 69)

As for the Powhatans in the movie, when Powhatan, Pocahontas’ father, found out Pocahontas knew John Smith, an Englishman, without hearing what she or Smith had to say, he tied up Smith and was going to kill him the next morning. According to my resources, this savage thought of the Powhatans is not true. In reality, Powhatan was sympathetic and offered to share the land with the English as long as they did not try to take it over. Powhatan states it himself which was translated by English interpreters. “For many do inform me your coming is not for trade, but to invade my people and possess my country... To cheer of this fear, leave aboard your weapons for here they are needless, we being all friends and forever Powhatans.” (Mossiker, page 119)

The film also portrays Smith incorrectly. Smith was not the outcast Englishman who wanted to help Pocahontas to save her land from the English, as the movie wants the viewer to believe. He was one of the main Englishmen who wanted the Powhatans land. Smith, co-captain of the English ship, refused to give up his weapons like Powhatan wanted. But from previous encounters with other Native Americans such as the voyage to Bermuda, he predicted that the Powhatans would let them keep their weapons by giving them something that does not have a lot value. “Smith was obviously the man to head the project: not only was he the official officer of the colony, he was conceded to be, far and away, the best Indian-trader. He won respect from the Indians with false persuasion.”(Barbour, page 34) This is exactly what Smith did as Mossiker explains. “But captain Smith refused to give up his weapons and eventually negotiated 10 ‘measures of corn’ and a piece of land in exchange for a copper kettle.” (Mossiker, page 120) Smith and his crew gave them copper kettle in exchange of keeping their weapons as well as giving them a portion of their land. I feel this was the English tricking the Powhatans into giving up their land, so they could profit from it, which they soon did.

Pocahontas' Kidnapping-

Contrary to the film's version of events, the English were not in Virginia to get gold. In fact, during the English' stay there, John Rolfe a "heavy smoker of tobacco" according to Mossiker, discovered there was a huge supply of tobacco on the Powhatans land. Before arriving to Jamestown, tobacco was already profitable export product. Because of this, Rolfe realized they could make a lot of money off of this land. Mossiker states tobacco was a moneymaker. "John Rolfe was just the man to recognize the sales potential of a good grade of the 'esteemed weed' (as he called it) in the English and European market." (Mossiker, page 173) All the books agree that it was the tobacco that caused the land conflict. As a result of the tobacco, the English wanted more land and the Powhatans did not want to it give up. This caused fighting between the two.

In 1613, the Powhatan Confederacy held some Englishmen captive. For revenge, the English decided to take his daughter Pocahontas. Woodward, who favors the English, explains the English captain, Thomas Argall's plot. "Argall decided to abduct Pocahontas and then inform Powhatan that if he wanted her release he must agree to an enduring peace... The abduction was a gamble. Luckily for the English, Powhatan surrendered the English prisoners in hope of seeing Pocahontas again." (Mossiker, page 168) The gamble succeeded, and Powhatan gave up the prisoners, thinking they would return twelve year old Pocahontas, but the English continued to hold her captive. The movie completely disregards the fact she was kidnapped. The movie instead, portrays Pocahontas as a woman of free spirit and followed her own rules; she does not listen to her father when he tells her to stay away from where the English were. This version of events is not true

because the fact is that she had no choice in anything because she was kidnapped, as I will later explain. According to Mossiker, we see that the English, including Smith, were dishonest people who did not keep their word in negotiations with the Indians. They did not consider lies and deceit, as far as they were concerned, as savage behavior. This was the beginning of the English take over of Werawocomoco. They wanted wealth, so they continued to take over more of Werawocomoco by pretending that Pocahontas would be returned to Powhatan, and this kept the Indians from retaliating.

The English claimed, as Woodward states, that Pocahontas did not want to leave and was angry with the Powhatans. “Pocahontas told them that she was deeply grieved by Powhatan’s unwillingness... adding that because she had been so well treated by the English she intended to remain with them, now preferring them to her own people.” (Woodward, page 164) I am not convinced of Pocahontas feeling this way about her Powhatan culture because through my research, I have not found any quotes or documents of Pocahontas. In fact, Barbour states there are no recordings of Pocahontas. “There seems to exist no record anywhere of her stating she wanted to do anything.” (Page 133)

Pocahontas’ time with the English-

Pocahontas did not only know Smith and their relationship was not mutual as the movie tries to convince the viewer. She had to follow the English’ orders. She was accompanied with forty- eight men and all sources agree on that. Captain Argall describes her poor treatment while she stayed with the English. “Pocahontas... she had been many times a preserver of Argall and the whole Colonie... that hee offered to beat her importunitie till she wept...” (Mossiker, page 157). All three sources agree that Pocahontas was a prisoner inside the English ship for many days. The English knew she could teach and help them grow tobacco because it grew on her land. If this is so, Pocahontas did not voluntarily teach them, rather, she was forced to teach them. Other than this, it is unknown what else she contributed to helping the English. Furthermore, from this information, it is only logical that they did not release her because 1) she most likely would have told her people about her mistreatment by the English, and 2) she would have probably told her father what the English plans were on taking over Werawocomoco. This would have destroyed the English take over of Indian land.

According to the books, Pocahontas obeyed the rules out of fear, although the movie portrays her as a “I’m going to do what I want” type of girl. For example, in the movie her best friend tells her to not go near where the English are, but she does it anyway. However, Rolfe admits she was not outgoing at all and besides, the movie does not show that she was kidnapped. He admits she was timid when he described the twelve year old Pocahontas. “...One whose education has been rude, her generation accursed, and so discrepant in all nurtriture from myself that oftentimes she had fear and trembling...” (Woodward, Page 163). This shows she was not

completely comfortable with the English. After all, Pocahontas was a twelve-year-old girl held captive by forty-eight men. It is probable that she would not go against their will because she was afraid. So as far as Rolfe stating that she was better than her tribe members and the movie portraying her as the only Indian who was capable being friends with an Englishman, is pure ignorance.

At the end of the movie, all the Englishmen meet her and showing automatic liking towards her- her being Indian and all. This is not true because as Rolfe explained he only accepted to marry her when she converted to Christianity, which is not an Indian tradition. So the English did not accept her as an “Indian” as the movie shows.

Rolfe, her future husband, was one of the shipmates who admitted his attraction, and he described her as an “exotic creature who is irresistible... these passions of my troubled soul.” (Mossiker, page 174). He said this before he married her, but as soon as she learned English and became a Christian after being help captive for so long suddenly she was marriage material for him. The English justified almost everything they did with Christianity. Because Christianity was the most significant part of being English, Rolfe decided to marry her because she was no longer “Indian”. “I know she’s browner than European dames, But whiter far, than other natives are.” (Mossiker, page 138) In this quote he acknowledges the fact that she is Indian on the outside but in the inside she is English, and he states how different she is from the rest the Powhatan Indians.

By this time she was far removed from the Powhatan way of life. By 1614, after being held under the English’ captivity for a year, she learned the English language and was baptized a Christian. Being baptized a Christian was a huge step for Pocahontas because religion was a big part of being English. “Everything the English did was to please their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. They justified their actions by stating is it was all in the glory of being a Christian. According to most of the English, if you were not Christian you were worthless.” (Barbour, page 158) It can not be determined whether she wanted to be baptized or not. But from being captive for so long by the English, most likely she had no choice but to adapt to English ways in order to communicate and fit into her new culture.

Woodward, who supports the love aspect of the movie (her falling in love with an Englishman), admits that Rolfe said his marriage to Pocahontas would help the economy of the colony and bring peace to both Indians and English. That was the English’s trick. “In the letter

Rolfe expressed his earnest desire to marry Pocahontas... Rolfe declared that it would be for the ‘good of the plantation, for the honour of our countrie, for the glory of God.’” Despite Woodward’s assertion that it was a “love math”, This supports the fact that this marriage was not based solely based on love. Rolfe’s quote insinuates that the good of the plantation meant the expansion of the land for a new colony. The honor of the country meant that other countries would see the English as the “almighty” conqueror. Lastly I believe that the glory to God meant that God would commend their efforts to rid the Indians of their “savagery”.

At the end of the film she chooses to stay with her father, but in reality, she did not. All accounts agree that Pocahontas stayed with the English in the end. In 1617, three years after being held captive, Pocahontas was brought back to the Powhatans for a visit. Her father asked why she wanted to be with men who were taking over his land. “Is this what you wish? To marry a coat wearing man? One who is stealing our land to plant tobacco on it? Are you sure you are not being tricked?” (Barbour, page 120) She did not respond. It appears that she was so far removed from her native ways that she did not want to be with her father. Her not wanting to be with her father very likely gave the English the glory of changing a “savage Indian” into an Englishmen. “Her arrival in England raised many eyebrows, but at the same time gave hop to the King and Queen that the English had the power to convert Indian ‘savages’.” (Barbour, page 58). I feel she decided to stay with the English because that was all she was surrounded by. As a result, she did not want to be around things that were not “English”. Sadly, it was her father she turned away from.

The Outcome-

On her way back to Virginia from England to be shown off to the King and Queen that same year, Pocahontas died of pneumonia on the ship. Then in 1618, Powhatan died and the fighting between the Powhatans and the English went on for twenty more years. In 1644, the English defeated the Powhatans by enslaving and killing many of them and burning down all their homes. Virginia became the first of the thirteen colonies.

The whole Pocahontas and Rolfe love story is inaccurate. The only thing the movie supports is that the Englishmen’s primary goal was to take over the land. Many people want to believe the myth because they do not want to admit that the conquerors were savages. Smith was

not an innocent Englishman who wanted the Indians to keep their land. The reality is, his mind frame was the same as the rest of his shipmates. If Smith were so different, he would have brought Pocahontas back to the Powhatans after his shipmate, Captain Argall, kidnapped her.

In conclusion, there was nothing “lovely” about Pocahontas’ situation. It was all about strategy to take over Werawocomoco. The movie tries to convince the viewer that she was not influenced by anyone and fell in love with Smith from her own instincts. But the reality is Pocahontas was a child who was manipulated into a culture against her will. Even though there are no written records that indicate what Pocahontas felt she may have learned to love Rolfe because he was the only English person she knew and trusted. But initially, Pocahontas was a tool used to trick Powhatan into giving up the land. As a result, the Indians have no land, and as you can see, the trick worked successfully.

Bibliography

Barbour, Philip L. (1970). Pocahontas and Her World. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Mossiker, Frances. (1996). Pocahontas: The Life and the Legend. New York: Da Capo Press.

Woodward, Graces Steele. (1969) Pocahontas. Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press.
Pocahontas (Disney, 1996)