Pocahontas and the Burghers of Calais:
The Queen as Intercessor in Seventeenth-Century America

Michael R. Evans, Delta College

The European encounter with the "New World" and its indigenous people has often been seen as a point of transition between the medieval and the modern eras. In the words of Kirkpatrick Sale, "Columbus is above all the figure with whom the modern age […] properly begins."[1] However, Europeans who encountered Native American societies also brought with them the mindset of their own medieval past. As Daniel Richter puts it, "[w]hen people from the two continents met each other in the sixteenth century, the terms of engagement were determined by systems of power that their respective medieval progenitors had created."[2] By understanding that early-modern Europeans viewed Native Americans through a medievalist lens, we can reinterpret one of the most famous, and problematic, accounts of English-Native interaction: the story of Pocahontas's intervention to save the life of Captain John Smith.

Smith's encounter with Pocahontas in 1608 has become part of the origin myth of English-speaking, white America, from Smith's first description of the incident in 1616 to the Disney animated movie *Pocahontas* (1995). The concept of an "Indian Princess" who saves an English adventurer, and later marries one his countrymen, provides a comforting narrative of racial cooperation to set against the reality of the dispossession of the indigenous population by European settlers. In this account, the "heroic deed [of saving John Smith] is credited with saving Jamestown from destruction and preserving the North American continent for future English colonization […] Pocahontas became so enamored of the British way of life that she spurned her pagan past, joined the Anglican Church, and wed the Englishman John Rolfe. Offspring of that union ostensibly married into families of English cavaliers and sired the upper echelon of the Old Dominion's plantation society," thereby providing members of Virginia's elite with a "royal" ancestor.[3] In the form of the Native American girl who becomes Christianized and Europeanized as "Lady Rebecca," "the antithesis" of the "nubile forest nymph"[4] of the Disney movie, it also provides a model of the "good Indian" who embraces the evident superiority of the invaders' culture and religion to set against her "savage" compatriots. A standard version of this colonialist narrative of the innocent girl whose tenderness raise her above her savage and ignorant people can be seen in the 1837 history by George Bancroft:

> The gentle feelings of humanity are the same in every race, and in every period of life; they bloom, though unconsciously, even in the bosom of a child. Smith had easily won the confiding fondness of the Indian maiden; and now an impulse of mercy awakened within her breast; she clung firmly to his neck, as his head was bowed to receive the strokes of the

[1] Cited in James Loewen, *Lies my Teacher Told Me*, 2nd ed. (New York: New Press, 2007), 31.
[2] Daniel K. Richter, *Before the Revolution: America's Ancient Pasts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.
[3] Anne Uhry Abrams, *The Pilgrims and Pocahontas: Rival Myths of American Origin* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1999), 3.
[4] Ibid, 51.

> tomahawk. Did the child-like superstition of her kindred reverence her interference as a token from a superior power?[5]

In reality, Pocahontas was baptized and married only following her capture by the English, and she later died of disease in England. Her compatriot Uttamatomakkin, a Powhatan priest who accompanied her on her journey to England in 1616-17, was so unimpressed by his experiences that "he became violently anti-English and reported back to his superiors accordingly."[6]

The core incident in the story of Pocahontas's intervention first appeared in a letter from John Smith to Anne of Denmark, queen of England and Scotland, in 1616. Smith, commander of the English colony at Jamestown, had been captured during the series of conflicts known retrospectively as the First Anglo-Powhatan War. He was held in comfortable captivity by Powhatan, leader of the eponymous confederation of Native tribes in the Tidewater region of Virginia, until:

> After some six weeks fatting [Smith had been well treated and fed by his captors] amongst those Saluage Courtiers, at the minute of my execution, she [Pocahontas] hazarded the beating out of her owne braines to saue mine; and not onely that, but so preuailed with her father, that I was safely conducted to James town[…][7]

These are the first bare bones of the tale that Pocahontas prevented Smith's execution at her father's hands by placing her head between Smith's and the executioner's club. Smith expanded the narrative (in the third person) in his *Generall Historie of Virginia* (1624):

> At last they brought him to Meronocomoco, where was Powhatan their Emperor. Here more than two hundred of those grim Courtiers stood wondering at him, as he had beene a monster; till Powhatan and his trayne had put themselues in their greatest braveries. Before a fire vpon a seate like a bedsted, he sat covered with a great robe, made of Rarowcun [raccoon] skinnes, and all the tayles hanging by. On either hand did sit a young wench of 16 or 18 yeares, and along on each side the house, two rowes of men, and behind them as many women, with all their heads and shoulders painted red: many of their heads bedecked with the white downe of Birds; but every one with some thing: and a great chayne of white beades about their necks. At his entrance before the King, all the people gaue a great shout. The Queene of Appamatuck was appointed to bring him water to wash his hands, and another brought him a bunch of feathers, in stead of a Towell to dry them: having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion

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[5] George Bancroft, *History of the United States, from the Discovery of the American Continent*, 15th ed., 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1837), 1: 131.
[6] Helen C. Rountree, "The Powhatans and the English: A Case of Multiple Conflicting Agendas," in *Powhatan Foreign Relations, 1500-1722*, ed. Helen C. Rountree (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 186.
[7] John Smith, "Letter to Queen Anne," 53-56; Clipping #322, *The Pocahontas Archive*, http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/pocahontas/clip.php.

> was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan: then as many as could layd hands on him, dragged him to them, and thereon laid his head, and being ready for their clubs, to beate out his braines, Pocahontas the King's dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne vpon his to saue him from death: whereat the Emperour was contented he should lieu to make him hatchets, and her bells, beads, and copper; for they thought him aswell of all occupations as themselues[…][8]

The veracity of Smith's account has long been disputed. Henry Adams in 1867 questioned why the story of Pocahontas's intercession did not appear in Smith's earliest account of his time in Virginia, the *True Relation of Virginia* (1608):

> When he [the reader] comes to the paragraph in which the *Generall Historie* relates the touching story of Pocahontas, and her intercession at the moment when no chance appeared to exist that Smith's life could be preserved, and when he casts his eye upon the opposite column of the *True Relation* [C1v-C2v] to find its version of the incident, he will surely be amazed to see that not only does it fail to furnish the remotest allusion to this act, or even by a single word to indicate that Pocahontas so much as existed, but that it expressly states that Powhatan treated his captive throughout with the greatest kindness, assuring him at once of his early liberation.[9]

More recent scholarship argues that Smith's account is not a complete invention, but rather a misinterpretation of the event. Even by his own account he had been held for six weeks and treated well, and the "execution" from which he was saved was part of a solemn ceremony before the tribal elders. Far from being an attempt on his life, the event was a ritual rebirth in which Smith symbolically died before being brought back to life by Pocahontas's intervention and adopted into the tribe. It was therefore not an act of violence but of peacemaking, and Pocahontas's intercession was not an outburst of romantic love or girlish pity, but pre-planned action by a high-status individual (the daughter of the chief in a society that practiced matrilineal succession). "For Powhatan, the objective of the ceremony was to overawe Smith with his power, then offer Smith an alliance, which he would gratefully accept."[10]

I will argue, however, that an additional interpretation can be placed on the incident that draws upon medieval European traditions with which Smith would have been familiar. Smith could only attempt to interpret the unfamiliar social landscape of North America through European values, and these values were still very much shaped by the medieval past. In the words of Edwin Rozwenc:

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[8] John Smith, *The Generall Historie*, 48-49; Clipping #324, *The Pocahontas Archive*, http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/pocahontas/clip.php.

[9] Henry Adams, "Captain John Smith", 11; Clipping #375, *The Pocahontas Archive*, http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/pocahontas/clip.php.

[10] Richard Middleton and Anne Lombard, *Colonial America: A History to 1763* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011), 58.

> Every man's vision is directed by the metaphors which rule his mind. We must, therefore, seek to discover how Captain Smith chose to give order and meaning to his experiences in the New World: what models of historical reporting were available to him and what resources could he draw upon out of the imaginative experience of Europeans to construct his own narrative? In the light of these questions, we begin to see how a spirit of knight-errantry and the yearnings of a self-made man are inter-woven in his conception of America and its possibilities.[11]

For Rozwenc, Smith's *Generall History* "adds new dimensions to the literary conventions of the chivalric romance."[12] It

> breathes a spirit that we associate with the popular romances of the Elizabethan Age. As Smith grew to manhood on a Lincolnshire farm, the vogue of the medieval chivalric romance was at its height in England. Popular versions of the knightly deeds of Guy of Warwick, Tom of Lincoln, and Palmerin of England fell from the presses like autumn leaves and fed the imaginations of middle-class readers for generations.[13]

Smith's letter to Queen Anne was written in the context of Pocahontas's journey to England with her husband John Rolfe in 1616-17, serving as, in effect, a letter of introduction, and it is possible that Smith played up the incident to romanticize the "princess" who would be feted at the royal court, rather than purely from a misunderstanding of its nature. It has been remarked that Pocahontas closely resembles the "Saracen Princess" trope in medieval romance, an identification reinforced by the fact that Smith, in his *True Travels*, tells of being delivered from slavery in the Ottoman Empire by his adoring Turkish lady owner.[14]

However, Pocahontas's action of intercession recalls another familiar trope of medieval culture; that of the queen as intercessor. As the "feminine" half of late-medieval monarchy, the queen was able to temper the retributive justice of the king with feminine mercy; in the words of John C. Parsons, late-medieval writers saw the king as "the head, she [the queen] the heart, or the king as law and the queen as mercy."[15] The role of queens as intercessors continued into the Tudor period in England; Katherine of Aragon intervened on behalf of Londoners who had rioted against Cardinal Wolsey in 1517, obtaining pardon for them from her husband Henry VIII "with tears in her eyes and on

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[11] Edwin C. Rozwenc, "Captain John Smith's Image of America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 16: 1 (Jan., 1959): 28.
[12] Ibid, 28.
[13] Ibid, 29.
[14] Jennifer Robin Godman, *Chivalry and Exploration, 1298-1630* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998), 213; Meriem Pagès, "Medieval Roots of the Modern Image of Islam: Fact and Fiction," in *Bridging the Medieval-Modern Divide: Medieval Themes in the World of the Reformation*, ed. James Muldoon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013), 23-44.
[15] Cited in Sarah Duncan, "'Most godly heart fraight with al mercie': Queens' Mercy during the Reigns of Mary I and Elizabeth I," in *Queens and Power in Medieval and Early Modern England*, eds. Carole Levin and R. O. Bucholz (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 32.

bended knees."[16] The tradition of the queenly intercessor had been complicated by the fact that England was ruled for sixty years from 1553 to 1603 by queens regnant, who had to "wield the (heretofore kingly) sword of justice," complicating their ability to exercise queenly mildness;[17] by the time of Smith's career in Virginia, however, English monarchy had once again been split into male and female aspects, represented by James I and Queen Anne, Pocahontas's hostess in 1616-17 and recipient of Smith's letter. This might, therefore, have been an appropriate time to revisit the medieval idea of queenly intercession (albeit unsuccessfully in the case of Sir Walter Raleigh's "Petition to Anne of Denmark," which failed to prevent his execution).[18]

Perhaps the most celebrated incident of queenly intercession in medieval England was that of Philippa of Hainault, wife of England's Edward III, who intervened to spare the lives of the six Burghers of Calais in 1347. As described by Jean le Bel, and incorporated into the chronicles of Froissart, the people of Calais agreed to surrender to Edward at the end of a long siege, with the English king agreeing to spare the town's inhabitants if six of the burghers agreed to surrender themselves to him, acting in effect as scapegoats or sacrificial victims to spare their fellow townspeople. The six men came out semi-naked, with halters around their necks, bearing the keys to the town. However, Queen Philippa, who was heavily pregnant, went down on her knees and begged that the men be spared. Moved by his wife's pleas, Edward agreed to spare the six burghers.[19]

Influenced by Froissart's sense of the chivalrous, readers long took this story at face value. It appealed to romantic sensibilities, as seen, for example, in the city of Calais's commission of a bronze of the Six Burghers by Rodin in 1880. However, the moving scene has more recently been deconstructed for its symbolic meaning and reinterpreted, most notably by Paul Strohm, as an elaborate piece of ceremonial play-acting.[20] In Strohm's words, Froissart's account includes "a number of elements commonly encountered in intercessory narrative, including the queen's adventitious appearance, her intercession as a last avenue of redress, and the extreme feminization of her public role and relation to the king."[21] She is feminized by her pregnancy, which is an invention (it does not match the known dates of birth of her children), and she is presented as marginal to the action until her dramatic act of intercession, which occurs only after Edward has ignored the advice of his male counselors to spare the burghers. "Froissart deliberately and dramatically holds Philippa to the periphery of the action until all other remedies have been exhausted."[22] The whole incident

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[16] Ibid., 33.
[17] Ibid., 31-2.
[18] Walter Raleigh, "Sir Walter Raleigh's Petition to Queen Anne of Denmark; 1618," Bartelby.com, http://www.bartleby.com/257/21.html.
[19] Froissart, *Chroniques*, Besançon MS 864, fos. 154r, 155r, *The Online Froissart*, http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/onlinefroissart/.
[20] Paul Strohm, *Hochon's Arrow: The Social Imagination of Fourteenth-Century Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 99-105.
[21] Ibid., 100-1.
[22] Ibid., 101.

follows a familiar pattern of female intercession or mediation, and, Strohm argues, far from being in opposition to Edward's desire to take harsh retribution against the burghers, queenly intercession "seems to have been entirely congenial to male monarchs and to the whole system of relations that maintained them on their thrones."[23] It allowed the king to temper male justice with female mercy, without himself appearing weak, in a kind of judicial, gendered division of labor:

> Edward III is doing what a king is supposed to do, judgmentally and legislatively; many lives have been lost as a result of the stubborn resistance at Calais, and a price must be paid. But Philippa, with her more spontaneous emotional identification with the disempowered, alerts him to a dimension of the situation that judgment untempered by mercy could not achieve. For all his blustery wishes that his wife had been elsewhere, we must imagine the Edward of this account well pleased, for, without any disrespect to the force of his male ire, his wife has contributed a supplementary perspective that will enhance the repute of his kingship.

In many ways, Pocahontas's role in saving John Smith recalls that of Philippa of Hainault. Pocahontas is feminized in relation to a male ruler as the "king's dearest daughter" (and described elsewhere in the *Generall Historie* as a "tender virgin"),[24] and, like Philippa, she rushes dramatically in from the periphery of the action, which has until now been dominated by descriptions of Powhatan and his "courtiers," and begs mercy after all other avenues have been exhausted, "when no intreaty could prevaile." There are, of course, differences; Pocahontas is not pregnant; she is the king's daughter, not his wife (the "queene of Appamatuck" appears in the account, but plays no intercessory role). It does, however, broadly match the model of queenly intercession. It is described by Ann Uhry Abrams "as a face-saving maneuver designed to preserve Smith's life and achieve peace with the colonists"[25] much as Philippa's intercession was a face-saving device that allowed Edward to make peace with Calais, a strategically and economically valuable prize whose leaders he could ill afford to alienate (the city remained in English hands until 1558, only 22 years before Smith's birth). Like Edward, Powhatan had an interest in making peace with his defeated enemies, allowing him to retain Smith's Englishmen as potential allies and trade-partners.

There are many ways in which Smith might have been familiar with the story of Queen Philippa's intercession on behalf of the Burghers. He was an associate of Robert Bruce Cotton (creator of the Cottonian manuscript collection), who urged him to write his *True Travels* of 1630,[26] and may have studied the works in Cotton's library, which included manuscripts of Froissart's history.[27] Moreover, Froissart had been translated into English by John Bourchier, Baron Berners, in 1523-6, and the

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[23] Ibid., 102.
[24] Abrams, *The Pilgrims and Pocahontas*, 16.
[25] Ibid, 18.
[26] David S. Shields, "The Genius of Ancient Britain," in *The Atlantic World and Virginia, 1550-1624*, ed. Peter C. Mancell (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 497.
[27] Cotton MS Nero D II; Cotton MS Cleopatra D II; Cotton MS Claudius B VI; *Cotton Catalogue*, HRI online. http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/cotton/cotframe.htm.

story of the Burghers of Calais also featured in the more recent chronicle of Raphael Holinshed of 1577.[28] The incident was dramatized in the play *Edward III*, sometimes attributed to Shakespeare, which was performed in the 1590s,[29] and with which Smith may have been familiar, as "some commentators have noted his connections to the literary world of the theatre[…]"[30]

None of this proves that Smith was familiar with the story of the Burghers, but it seems reasonable to suppose that it was part of the mental world of an educated gentleman in Jacobean England, especially one closely associated with the circle of the historian and collector Cotton. Moreover, Smith's career was often framed by his contemporaries in medievalist terms, as a chivalrous crusading knight. His epitaph eulogized him as such:

> Shall I report his former service done
> In honour of his God and Christendom?
> How that he did divide from Pagans three
> Their heads and lives, Types of his Chivalry?[31]

The "Pagans three" is a reference to Smith's deed of beheading three Turks in battle during his service fighting for the king of Hungary against the Ottoman Turks, service for which Smith was as well known in his day (if not more so) as for his deeds in Virginia. Indeed, a play, Richard Gunnell's *Hungarian Lion* (1623), celebrated these deeds on the London stage, and Smith even attended a performance.[32] To antiquarians such as Cotton, "Smith seemed a Beowulf incarnate—an avatar of ancient energy—at times a martial Roman, at others a freedom-loving Anglo-Saxon, or […] a latter-day member of Arthur's round table, an embodiment of knightly virtue[…]" His killing of the three Turks "recounted what might have been the last recorded deed of knightly chivalry in the West. Its resonance would not have been lost on [Cotton] the discoverer of the manuscript of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*."[33] (Cotton's association with that Middle English poem also raises the intriguing possibility that Smith's account of his near-"execution" at Powhatan's court may have been influenced by the beheading-game of that poem). Smith may have been an agent in forming the modern Atlantic world, but his deeds were perceived by contemporaries in medievalist terms, and his account of his encounter with Pocahontas employs a trope with medieval origins.

What of Pocahontas herself? Can this medievalist interpretation restore a measure of female authority to her? Smith's portrayal of her has often been critiqued for turning her into a meek, submissive figure, subject to the political conquest of Virginia by the English, and the sexual

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[28] Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, 1st ed., 4 vols. (London: Henry Bynneman, 1577), 4: 941. http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/texts.php?text1=1577_5320.
[29] E. Pearlman, "'Edward III' in 'Henry V'," *Criticism* 37:4 (1995): 519.
[30] Shields, "The Genius of Ancient Britain," 494.
[31] Ibid., 492.
[32] Ibid., 492-3.
[33] Ibid., 500.

conquest of her marriage to an Englishman and acceptance of a new name, religion, and identity. In the words of Jeffrey Richards:

> One of the tropes that marks dramas of civilizing is that of romantic love as a humanizing force more powerful than sheer military might to overcome the presumed violence and ignorance of colonized non-Christians. Through erotic force, backed by martial competence, the doubly potent European defeats the doubly impotent "Indian," seizes the woman and the land, and expels the older, unchangeably "native" man, leaving only the younger Indian male on the colonized margin of the stage to wonder at the puissance of the western hero.[34]

This, however, is a product not so much of Smith's own writing as subsequent centuries' romanticization of the Pocahontas story. Powhatan's society afforded a higher status to women than did that of Jacobean England, a fact attested to by Smith's recording the presence of "wenches," "two rowes of men, and behind them as many women," and the "queene" at the false-execution ceremony. If Smith is representing Pocahontas in the role of queen-as-intercessor, his account is still refracted through a Eurocentric lens, and still relegates her to the walk-on role of tempering Powhatan's power with mercy, but it does restore to her a measure of authority and agency.

It is, ultimately, impossible to say to what extent Smith's narrative was influenced—whether consciously or subconsciously—by the story of the Burghers of Calais, or by the medieval European traditions of queenly intercession in general. We can, at least, say with a degree of confidence that the Burghers of Calais story was part of the culture of theater, literature and antiquarian history in Smith's day, and that he was part of a scholarly and theatrical milieu that could have introduced him to the idea. It is also consistent with the medieval and orientalist trope of the Saracen princess, which we see even in Smith's own self-glamorizing account of his adventures fighting the Ottoman Turks. I would not claim that Pocahontas as a European-style queenly intercessor is the definitive interpretation of Smith's account of her intervention. It can, however, add another element to our understanding of an incident that is more a construct of the European imagination than an account of indigenous culture. The Europeans of the colonial era may have seen the Americas as a "New World," but they brought with them medievalist attitudes shaped in the Old.

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[34] Jeffrey H. Richards, *Drama, Theatre, and Identity in the American New Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 168; Clipping #376 *The Pocahontas Archive*, http://digital.lib.lehigh.edu/trial/pocahontas/bib.php?query=id%3A4012.