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# Disney's modern heroine Pocahontas: revealing age-old gender stereotypes and role discontinuity under a façade of liberation

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## Abstract

Disney's animated heroine Pocahontas has been touted as a new type of protagonist differing from her predecessors whose lives revolve around men. Pocahontas' romance eventually *does* become subordinate to her role in protecting the social fabric of her village. Yet in placing the needs of her community before her own personal desires, she fulfills societal expectations of today wherein young women are supposed to progress from selfish absorption in relationships to selfless dedication nurturing others. Pocahontas, then, models the submersion of a young woman's desires to allow a commitment to selfless altruism. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

With the movement of Disney movies into a successful home viewing market, Disney characters have become well-known to millions of children.<sup>1</sup> Indeed one analyst of the Disney empire opines "these films inspire at least as much cultural authority and legitimacy for teaching specific roles, values and ideals than more traditional sites of learning such as public schools, religious institutions and the family" (Giroux, 1995, p. 25). While parents express concern about what such films impart to their children, the 1995 release of Disney's animated version of *Pocahontas* was applauded because of the metamorphosis of the usual docile Disney heroine into an adventurous young woman who stands up for her beliefs (Gabriel, 1995; Henke, Birnie, Zimmerman & Smith, 1996; James, 1995; Riemenschneider, 1995). Pocahontas continues to stand out since she remains one of the few female protago-

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nists—a title character, in fact— whose story does not end in matrimony. Pocahontas indeed breaks the mold for Disney heroines, providing a role model sharply divergent from the submissive Snow White of 1935 who concerns herself with domestic duties and later waits passively to be rescued. Yet both *Pocahontas* and the sequel *Pocahontas II* released three years later in 1998, nevertheless reinforce stereotypes of girls whose identity is determined first by romantic relationships and later by their role as a selfless nurturer, not so starkly different from Snow White, after all.<sup>2</sup> According to Disney’s animated film version, when the English arrive in Virginia<sup>3</sup> in the early 1700s to plunder the land for its riches, Pocahontas and John Smith fortuitously meet and gradually replace their prejudice with passion. At the end of the movie, when Smith must return to England for treatment of his wounds, Pocahontas must decide whether she will go with him. Although she wishes to stay with the man she loves which also would allow her to pursue further adventures, she instead fulfills her perceived obligation to stay with the villagers who “need” her.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in the culminating moment of the movie, she transcends her all-engrossing romance in favor of self-sacrifice. Her evolution is characteristic of what Carol Gilligan calls an ethic of care where decisions and morality center on relationships, evolving from selfish to selfless during adolescence (Gilligan, 1993). This change in expectations which anthropologist Ruth Benedict termed role discontinuity occurs abruptly upon adolescence (Benedict, 1968). Youth must adapt to a new adult role for which there has often been little preparation. Pocahontas, however, suddenly shifts from her obsession with Smith to a resolution to fulfill her community’s needs, while subverting her own desires. In doing so, she traverses with ease the often tumultuous transition from self-absorption to self-denial.

Pocahontas’ shift from total absorption in her romantic relationships—egocentrism characteristic of lower moral development as defined by Lawrence Kohlberg—to Gilligan’s ethic of care is apt preparation for the sacrifice demanded in motherhood. Yet promoting nurturance as a woman’s primary goal can lead to dependence on others for approval and self-esteem. When the movie culminates in a crossroads in which Pocahontas must choose between self-sacrificing duty and her own desires, the viewer wonders about her future sense of accomplishment and happiness. Is Pocahontas a laudable role model if she must choose between self-abnegation and self-indulgence?

Others who have critiqued Disney’s Pocahontas have asserted that the story substitutes a harmonious union of colonizers and natives for the ugly reality of mass annihilation. A romance in which Pocahontas is enlightened by a White man (John Smith) who saves her from the repressive patriarchy of her own culture, legitimizes the need for these purportedly benevolent invaders (Buescher & Ono, 1996). Also noted by critics are omissions of integral parts of Pocahontas’ life which might stir controversy.<sup>5</sup> While such types of analysis provide fascinating food for thought, they do not explore the role that Pocahontas plays as a role model for young girls. An analysis by Henke et al. (1996) examines Disney heroines and proclaims that Pocahontas “break[s] new ground” (p. 234). The authors claim that “Her dreams direct her choice. . . . of autonomous womanhood. . . . [S]he takes her place as an unattached female leader of her people” (p. 240). While it seems clear that Pocahontas does indeed “choose a destiny other than that of heterosexual romantic fulfillment” (p. 241) as these authors contend, this paper will explore how Pocahontas *reinforces* gender stereotypes wherein a heroine makes decisions based on her relationships and then undergoes a sudden,

discontinuous transformation from selfish preoccupation with relationships to selflessness in order to benefit her community and prepare for the self-sacrifice underlying motherhood. Ironically, the real Pocahontas was able to fulfill her dreams, both romantically (in her marriage to John Rolfe) and in taking on the uncharted course that took her to England to serve as an important and well-received ambassador of her people (which is explored—and distorted—in the sequel). While Henke et al. (1996) conclude that Pocahontas represents the exception who fulfills her “explorations and dreams of something ‘grand’” (p. 246), Pocahontas in fact forgoes the adventures (undertaken by the real Pocahontas!) by staying home. Her dreams of becoming an ambassador of sorts overseas (again, like the real Pocahontas) are substituted with the gender stereotyped role of the woman as chief nurturer who sacrifices to ensure the welfare of others, regardless of her own needs and ambition.

### *1.1. A new breed of heroines?*

In the first scene of *Pocahontas*, it becomes clear that a new heroine has been created. Not only does Pocahontas revel in maneuvering through raging white water rapids which take her over a precipitous waterfall, but she also joyfully dives off a cliff into water hundreds of feet below. Her fortitude goes beyond physical skill; she stands up for what she believes in—even disobeying her father who eventually realizes the extent of her wisdom. Perhaps most notable is her divergence from the typical mold for female leads who must be rescued by a male hero. To the contrary, Pocahontas must rescue the male protagonist, John Smith. Her daring move in which she steps in front of her father as he attempts to deliver a fatal blow saves Smith, who lies bound and powerless.<sup>6</sup>

### *1.2. Gender-specific moral growth*

Yet despite such an uncharacteristic portrayal of a strong female lead, Pocahontas' actions are driven by selfish love, rather than a more noble, altruistic cause. She does not want the man *she* loves to die. After she throws herself over John Smith to protect him from her father's lethal wrath, she proclaims her love for him as a rationale for saving his life. While their love resulted in peace, it was a consequence, not a driving force behind the detente between the Indians and the white settlers. Further evidence of Pocahontas' egocentrism surfaces when John Smith is hauled off to bear the punishment for (his friend's) killing of Kocoum, a prominent Indian warrior and suitor of Pocahontas; she reacts as follows: “And now I will never see John Smith again.” It seems that her main concern is for her own mental health—not for the warrior who has died nor for Smith who is scheduled for execution nor for the mounting tension between the settlers and the Indians.

Such egocentric motivation falls into a lower level of moral development, as delineated by Lawrence Kohlberg (Kohlberg, 1981). According to Kohlberg, the first level of moral development, typical of young children, is egocentrism. The individual aims to meet his or her own needs. In the next stage, the individual follows the rules that maintain order in a society, benefiting others. Finally, in the most advanced stage, a person's actions are guided by higher principles of human rights, liberty, or equality, and so forth. While both Pocahontas and John Smith undergo development during the course of the movie, the underlying moral

impetus varies by gender stereotype. Smith becomes introspective, realizing that imperialism and discrimination are wrong. At first his bravery is driven by his lust for adventure; shooting Indians is considered a sport. But after Pocahontas teaches him the error of his thinking, he dashes to become the target for a bullet meant for the Chief in order to keep the peace. 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. When she protects Smith from her father's potentially fatal blow in retaliation for Kocoum's murder, she asserts, "I love him." Her actions, while overtly heroic, with far-reaching consequences, center around a relationship—her feelings for and urge to protect the object of her love. Pocahontas' wish to maintain peace seems to be a means for her to continue her budding romance. The problem which Pocahontas appears determined to solve is one which threatens to interfere with a relationship, not one which affects the core of society, (a portrayal which then provides a marked contrast to illustrate her "growth" when she later decides to consider the welfare of the group and stay behind in her village). In this defining moment of the movie when she saves Smith's life, she manifests not only egocentrism, but also what Gilligan calls the ethic of care where decisions about what is right or wrong rest on relationships—how people would feel rather than what is deemed a "higher" principle such as advocating human rights, or peace as delineated by Lawrence Kohlberg.<sup>7</sup> While Kohlberg can be justifiably criticized for his limited construction of stages of morality based on male patterns of duty, Pocahontas' representation of the female pattern of care manifests too narrow a focus on the welfare of interpersonal relationships. Pocahontas' actions also correspond to age-old depictions of admirable American Indian women as those who save and aid White men, are the object of White men's sexual desire, and who cannot stand to witness what is considered to be the barbaric killing of White men by their own people (Green, 1990; Sundquist, 1987).

In addition, her heroic actions, based on emotion, rather than rational thought, could be pejoratively characterized as revealing typical female volatility. This trait is apparent in the only other female to utter a single word in the whole movie, Pocahontas' best friend, Nakoma. Nakoma, jealous of Kocoum's affection for Pocahontas, tells Kocoum that Pocahontas may be in trouble. Kocoum then searches for Pocahontas, finding her locked in an embrace with Smith. A deadly conclusion ensues when a fellow Englishman shoots Kocoum as the Indian warrior attacks Smith. This sequence also subscribes to stereotypical behavior with its tension stemming from a chaste heroine's competition with other newly nubile women for mates (Stone, 1975).

### *1.3. The moral hierarchy*

Even if viewers believe that Pocahontas' egocentrism coexists with more noble intentions, her motivation still could be construed as existing at a lower level than men, namely John Smith. She makes decisions about right and wrong based on others' feelings and relationships. According to Carol Gilligan, because girls are not urged to separate from their mothers, their sense of self is based on relationships (Gilligan, 1993). Thus, relationships, care and connection to others are the values that underlie morality. Kohlberg's stages of moral development would place girls' reasoning based on an ethic of care at a lower level of development than decisions based on justice. In other words, motivation to help others is

deemed inferior to aspiring to keep the peace. Contrast Pocahontas' responses to both her angry father, "I was only trying to help" and to her disapproving friend Nakoma, "I'm trying to *help* my own people" with Smith's challenge to the Governor: "But this is their land!", an audacious display of his newly-found morality.

#### 1.4. *Selflessness*

Even though Gilligan moves away from saying one type of moral reasoning is superior or inferior, she laments how society sends girls *changing* messages about what should be valued. At about ten years of age, girls receive signals to repress their feelings—to become selfless, not selfish. Close relationships become "dangerous because they conflict with the image of the good—that is, 'selfless'—woman". (Hekman, 1995, p. 12). This change occurs when Pocahontas decides to stay with her tribe rather than accompany her beloved John Smith on an unknown adventure. Regretfully she tells him she is "needed" in her community. The poignant conclusion grants her a final display of passion when she suddenly sprints up the cliffs to catch a last glimpse of Smith as his ship sails away. Yet immediately upon her arrival at the summit, she recaptures her "proper" bearing by waving a stoic farewell thereby demonstrating her acceptance of her new role in which her own desires are subordinate. This sharply contrasts with her earlier unrestrained rebellious acts and decisions, for example, rejecting the calm path of the river in favor of the turbulent path as it forks during her canoe trip, and her rejection of Kocoum's marriage proposal which her father encourages for the security it would provide. Yet it is not unexpected in light of societal expectations that a mature woman will subjugate her own desires in order to benefit others.

While some have applauded this ending as a departure from the so-called fairy tale ending where women achieve fulfillment from marriage to the handsome prince/hero, it is consistent with the changing societal expectation which Gilligan criticizes: early on, women are socialized to think that decisions based on relationships are appropriate, only to be told as they get older that to stay in relationships and make decisions based on them is egocentric—now negatively viewed. The new pressure to selflessly set aside bonds in relationships results in what Gilligan calls "a profound psychological loss" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 180). Tension—later referred to by Gilligan as musical language—ensues, where women define selfishness as a moral failing and are expected to set aside their own desires to accommodate the needs of others. During adolescence, girls move from authentic to idealized relationships (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). In contrast, boys and men may focus just on duty which remains noble and moral. Gilligan concludes that women are disadvantaged on two fronts— young women "are excluded both from the masculine model of autonomous selfhood and from the kind of open, honest relationships that they knew as preadolescent girls" (Brown & Gilligan, 1992, p. 15).

#### 1.5. *Pocahontas versus Disney's The Little Mermaid: a step backwards?*

Ironically, in the first of the new Disney movies, *The Little Mermaid* (1989), a courageous young woman relentlessly pursues her goals to achieve personal fulfillment—even if the goal is matrimony. In doing so, she avoids the profound loss Gilligan delineates. In fact, the Little

Mermaid, Ariel, manifests neither the nurturing nor self-sacrifice that characterizes later heroines, Pocahontas in particular.<sup>8</sup> This self-interest differs from Hans Christian Andersen's (1837) tale in which the Little Mermaid is faced with a choice: she must either kill the prince (who loves her only as a sister) and his bride which will allow her to become a mermaid again or return to the ocean where she will die and become sea foam (O'Brien, 1996). When she chooses the latter, her self-sacrifice is rewarded when she becomes an angel. Furthermore, unlike Pocahontas who ends up forsaking a romantic relationship with John Smith that her father initially censures, Ariel ignores paternal disapproval, revealing tremendous determination and perseverance, eventually marrying the prince. Ariel's decision to marry the prince also demonstrates a great sense of adventure as she willingly embarks on a new life as a human, away from all that she has known. So while the supposedly modern Pocahontas stays home, the "traditional" Ariel bravely explores and then embraces the unknown human world which has always fascinated her. The *Little Mermaid's* most selfless character turns out to be Ariel's *father*. He sacrifices himself by trading places with her to appease the Sea Witch, whose later violent death suggests that female ambition should be limited to love and adventures, not usurping male power (Dundes & Dundes, 2000). So even though Ariel's selfishness and culminating moment of matrimony exemplify sexism, it is not necessarily more pernicious than that portrayed in Pocahontas who is widely perceived as progressive. In the end, Ariel binds herself to a man she loves and admires while fulfilling her dreams in a new world; Pocahontas is bound to serve a community that does not share her interest in and tolerance for outsiders—after first enjoying an exciting period of adventure and romance which is abruptly curtailed.

#### 1.6. *Ruth Benedict's role discontinuity*

This change in expectations was explored by Ruth Benedict who identified it as a discontinuity in cultural conditioning (Benedict, 1968). In some areas, children's behavior does not change upon adulthood, for example, they continue to eat three meals a day. Yet in other areas, there are drastic differences, for example, the degree of responsibility a child should have changes from play to work; from submission to dominance; from sex as wicked to healthy. In some cultures, there are elaborate ceremonies where children are reborn into their new role, for example, rituals signifying boys' separation and independence from their mother. Benedict argues that we do not help children make the transition between childhood and adulthood—where previously acceptable behaviors are now unacceptable:

Adults in our culture put all the blame on the child when he fails to manifest spontaneously the new behavior or, overstepping the mark, manifests it with untoward belligerence. It is not surprising that in such a society many individuals fear to use behavior which has up to that time been under a ban and trust instead, though at great psychic cost, attitudes that have been exercised with approval during their formative years. (Benedict, 1968, p. 167)

#### 1.7. *Sex as a discontinuity and an act of altruism*

A prime example of role discontinuity relevant to Pocahontas—a love story—is the place of romance. Young women in the late 1990s continue to receive mixed messages about

permissible sexual behavior. When is it acceptable to move from childhood sensuality to adult concupiscence? Though this question also may confuse boys, the social sanctions against them for an inappropriate transition pale next to the repercussions for girls. Pocahontas clearly is attracted to John Smith, but she initially resists his efforts to kiss her—interestingly, breaking away from his embrace when she hears her village’s drums signaling trouble. In other words, she begins her transition from giving in to passion to suppressing it when her help may be needed. It is the first sign that her role in her community will take precedence over her own desires. The ambiguity surrounding indulging one’s sexual desires contributes to the number of girls who feel that “it’s okay to be swept away, but that ‘nice girls’ don’t plan for sex” (Coontz, 1992, p. 203). In becoming selfless, a young woman might believe that she should not focus on her own sexual desires, but rather should satisfy the needs of her partner. Unfortunate consequences can result: “[g]irls who become sexually active at an early age, far from being feminist in outlook, tend to have exceptionally strong dependency needs. They are more often motivated by a desire to please their partners than by a search for their own sexual satisfaction” (Coontz, 1992, p. 203).

#### *1.8. Preparation for maternity*

Sexual activity is only one changing area of relationships girls must navigate as they get older. While they still are concerned about and measure themselves in terms of relationships, now they must act in accordance with what will please others. Gilligan discusses the sense of loss women feel when forced to relinquish their intimate relationships to become selfless (Gilligan, 1993). Girls are pressured to abandon play, a state unfettered by romantic entanglements (just crushes on boys), where they are immersed in close childhood friendships. Why should they become selfless? It could be preparation for the maternal role that requires a mother to subvert her own needs in order to meet the demands of her children. Thus, self-sacrifice encouraged during adolescence is training for motherhood. In her final moments in the movie, Pocahontas reinforces her new, more maternal role as a selfless nurturer, as she ministers to Smith, presenting him with healing bark from a special willow tree. There is nothing wrong with being a nurturing human being, but we must be aware that it is presented as the supreme female virtue.

#### *1.9. Variation in self-validation*

While girls are supposed to be unselfish, boys have less of a transition; they may continue to promote their own interests and are not expected to be more mature and leave behind play. This is because not only will boys be boys, but the acceptability of “men also will be boys.” While John Smith clearly attains a revered status at the movie’s conclusion, he also retains his propensity for risk-taking, even in his mature state. This is demonstrated when he offers to stay in Virginia with Pocahontas, an irresponsible suggestion since it would prevent him from receiving medical treatment necessary for his survival. In contrast, Pocahontas is practical—urging him to go, but staying in her village, as she attempts to secure the welfare of both Smith and her extended family; only her own needs are submerged. At a surface level, the audience admires her for making a difficult decision. But at a deeper level, by

conforming with what is expected of her, Pocahontas shows that ultimately she will now rely on others' approval for self-validation while her sense of individuality will become subsumed within a web of bonds in her community. Depending on the approbation of others for self-esteem not only weakens individuality, it also is conducive to instability and is widely construed as a weakness in this culture (Sanford & Donovan, 1984).

### 1.10. Role discontinuity and self-esteem

Is there reason to be concerned about pubescent girls' sense of self? *School Girls: Self-Esteem and the Confidence Gap*, (Orenstein, 1994), discusses the results of a much-publicized survey of 3,000 boys and girls 9–15 years old which showed that girls suffer a loss of self-esteem as they become adolescents. Girls question their competencies, especially in math and science as they lose confidence in their ability to fulfill their dreams. Orenstein explains:

We live in a culture that is ambivalent toward female achievement, proficiency independence, and right to a full and equal life. Our culture devalues both women and the qualities which it projects onto us, such as nurturance, cooperation, and intuition. It has taught us to undervalue our selves. Too often we deride our own abilities (Introduction, xix).

Although pressures to attain an unrealistic body image and beauty ideals to attract a mate are commonly blamed for young women's depressed self-esteem, the impact of role duality and discontinuity must not be ignored. While pubertal girls are supposed to break off intimate relationships to do what is best for their community, they simultaneously receive conflicting signals to be good spouses and mothers *and* have careers. Thus, while in the midst of a traumatic loss, many girls may worry (with good reason) that they will not be able to achieve all that is expected.

When girls fail to live up to what they perceive that society expects of them, they feel they have failed. So while Orenstein wonders why girls are plagued with self-doubt "*in spite of the changes in women's role in society, in spite of the changes in their own mothers' lives*" (xvi: italics mine), it is actually *because* their mothers have shown them that there is more opportunity which may increase pressure on them, as they not only wish to be good spouses and mothers, but also are now expected to have careers—perhaps even surpassing their mothers' accomplishments. In contrast, the women who currently hold positions of power *defied* expectations about women's ability to excel in the workforce. Even so, these women are "intensely ambivalent about the tradeoffs between work and parenting" (Coontz, 1992, p. 216).

In light of pressures on young women to "have it all," Pocahontas' farewell in the movie is comforting (even if reactionary): she knows her place; she is not attempting to both nurture the villagers *and* embark on a trans-Atlantic adventure. She avoids the difficulty of being a super mom and an illustrious career woman. In this context, it is no wonder that girls transitioning into adulthood would suffer a loss of self-esteem as they anxiously wonder how they will ever achieve a balance that is deemed success.

Pocahontas shows one way to resolve the crisis—following the seemingly instinctual path toward nurturance. Her life revolves around relationships, she avoids role discontinuity, and she overcomes her sense of loss to transition from selfish to selfless. She even has her claim

to fame by stopping war and saving lives—achieved in the course of her concern about a relationship (with Smith). When she selflessly decides to stay with her villagers who “need” her, she can now settle back down to her traditional role as spouse and mother, avoiding the conflicts that characterize modern-day real life. In this sense, the movie confirms stereotypes *and* is a fantasy. By staying with her people, Pocahontas avoids role confusion and role discontinuity, so troubling for American girls who are torn by the desire to be exemplary mothers and successful in their careers.

Was Disney subject to criticism no matter what ending it chose? The answer is certainly not. Either Pocahontas could have elected to stay home because she felt *she* would be more fulfilled in that setting or because she felt she would be able to accomplish more of her goals, perhaps as a leader advocating tolerance. Since her actions prompting peace were driven by her passion for a man who was leaving, the possibility that she decided to stay to be an activist is both undeveloped and unlikely. Disney missed an opportunity to suggest that she would be a future peacekeeper. Instead of saying merely that she was needed at home, she could have said, “I’m needed here and I can’t miss the opportunity to share my beliefs about how we can live in peace together.” The viewer has no sense that she craves a leadership role nor that she has a sense of *duty* to continue to promote peace, but rather that she regretfully but willingly will fulfill an expected function as a community member. Thus, any leadership role she might be expected to assume is left unsaid, and is certainly secondary to the painful self-sacrifice she experiences. While some analysts (Henke et al., 1996) state that “[h]er acceptance of herself and her leadership role within her community are the keys to her happiness” (p. 243), the movie’s ending is sad and her presumed leadership role is hardly assured in what possibly may be a patriarchal culture. If Pocahontas *is* to be an exception, the viewer would need to hear such a role clearly articulated by Pocahontas or another character.

Another acceptable ending would have been to see Pocahontas sail off into the sunset with John Smith not just because she loved him, but also because of a burning desire to explore new worlds or to serve as a type of ambassador representing her people.

Similar to the suggestion above, this would have challenged stereotypes by combining a concern about others and the community with a sense of duty about matters that extend beyond relationships.

### 1.11. *Pocahontas II, the sequel*

In 1998, Disney released a sequel to Pocahontas entitled *Pocahontas II: Journey to a New World*. In this direct-to-video production, which did not attract nearly the same attention or viewership, Pocahontas does indeed explore a new world (London). Nevertheless, she continues her role as peacemaker while squelching her personal desires for the good of her community and others, including animals and even unworthy humans. Before Pocahontas journeys to London with John Rolfe to serve in a diplomatic role in mediating between the English settlers and her people, she imperils herself to save an unsympathetic Jamestown settler. The man spits out a vitriolic “Savages!” at her moments before he finds himself underfoot of a spooked horse. The fact that the ungrateful man is then unmoved by her rescue

makes Pocahontas all the more heroic because she will risk her life even for someone who does not deserve it—the ultimate in altruism!

Pocahontas has the opportunity to stop the English from sending an armada to attack her people by appearing civilized at a formal ball (showing that American Indians deserve to be spared). The King will judge her on her etiquette and manners. The old nemesis, Governor Ratcliffe, accurately assesses Pocahontas' character and realizes that she will vociferously object to bear-baiting, the dinner entertainment. Pocahontas indeed decries the "torture" of a "helpless" animal in chains. When goaded, she asserts that the English are the barbarians. She is then imprisoned to await execution. Ratcliffe thus successfully destroys Pocahontas' credibility by appealing to her nurturing side (and her volatility) wherein she risks diplomatic success in order to try to stop the cruel treatment of a bear.

Later, after being rescued by both John Rolfe and her love from the first movie, John Smith, Pocahontas assesses the two suitors' advice about her next move toward peace: Smith urges her to seek a safe course while Rolfe proclaims, "she can't turn her back on her people." As expected, Pocahontas risks her life to advocate for those at home. In response to Smith's admonition of possible hanging, she responds "then I'll be but the first to hang." In other words, she is willing to sacrifice herself for the cause. Later the King underscores her self-sacrifice: "Why do you speak out when it could mean your life?" Even in the final moments of the film when Pocahontas has achieved her mission and stopped the armada, she still does not allow herself to follow her own desires. Pocahontas has fallen in love with John Rolfe, now the new Lord Advisor to the Royal Court who is expected to stay in London. Yet even having achieved her laudable goal, Pocahontas still sadly boards the ship to return home, never having articulated nor attempted to fulfill her own desires. Instead, she again places others' needs at home over personal fulfillment. So when Rolfe surprises her by boarding the ship to accompany her, her romantic needs finally are met without conflicting with her fundamental attribute of personal sacrifice. She is fortunate that the efforts of another enable her to enjoy both selfless and selfish aspects of life.

## **2. Conclusion**

While some could argue that Disney merely adheres to the realities of a bygone era characterized by women's circumscribed role, Disney nevertheless modernizes other aspects of the Pocahontas story. Although Pocahontas shows vast improvement over such protagonists as Snow White, Cinderella, and Sleeping Beauty, we must remain alert to lingering sex stereotypes that send powerful messages to our youth.

Otherwise, the lesson that girls' own desires and ambitions must be subordinated to self-sacrifice continues to resonate years later as described extensively by Golden (1998) and encapsulated by Washington Post columnist Judy Mann:

A favorite line among men who feel neglected because their spouses are working outside the home is to call them selfish. . .[a] spear hurled with deadly effectiveness. For women raised since infancy to nurture others, the attack goes right to the core of their identity (Mann, 1994, p. 58).

While young women are aware that tales like Pocahontas are fantasy, they nevertheless

may feel “left out” thinking “there [is] something wrong with *me*, not with the fairy stories” (Stone, 1975, p. 49). In a society with conflicting messages about not only the appropriate role for women, but also their changing–discontinuous–role, Pocahontas has modeled a stereotypical and unrealistically fluid transformation from self-indulgence to altruism for hundreds of thousands of young women. No one expects the two sexes to be identical, yet portrayals that reinforce limitations on women’s function in society should be replaced with roles that place no boundaries on what women can achieve.

## Notes

1. Viewership extends way beyond the United States; in 1995, Disney’s Pocahontas was the third highest grossing movie abroad (after *Die Hard with a Vengeance* and *GoldenEye*) (Thompson, 1996).
2. Pocahontas also continues Disney’s tradition of presenting a body type which is exaggerated and unattainable (see e.g., Bell, Haas, & Sells, 1995).
3. The American Indian tribe, the Powhatan Nation (named for Pocahontas’ father) was a confederacy of 34 tribes ranging in area from modern-day North Carolina to Southern Maryland (Faiola, 1995).
4. Disney studios have taken great liberty with the historical details as well as the spirit of Pocahontas’ life. For example, Pocahontas, who was about 11—not 20, when she met and aided Smith, had no romance with him (Robertson, 1996). Also, in the Pocahontas sequel, Disney pursues a theme that may reflect the allure of the real Pocahontas to non American Indians. The historical Pocahontas can be seen as someone who chose the English over her own people—someone who renounced savagery, embraced Christianity and was renamed Rebecca—a model contrasting with other American Indians who stymied English settlement of their new nation (Tilton, 1994). While Disney did retain certain attributes, such as Pocahontas’ willingness to act as an emissary from her father to the English and become their advocate (Ransome, 1991), the overall portrayal is distorted.
5. For critiques of the historical portrayal, see Dutka, 1995; Faiola, 1995; Schwartz, 1995, and Strong, 1996. Buescher and Ono (1996) point out that Pocahontas can find true love only in a relationship with a White man.
6. According to historical accounts, Pocahontas does rescue Smith—but by secretly warning him of her father’s planned attack despite her father’s outward appearance of friendship. Pocahontas, does in fact, later play a major role in making peace between the Powhatans and the English when she marries Englishman John Rolfe, with her father’s blessing—perhaps when he realizes the English cannot be driven away. The marriage purportedly symbolized a lasting union between the two worlds (Woodward, 1969).
7. Gilligan’s work has been revisited extensively. Some, for example, suggest that different approaches to problem solving are based on the type of current life situation rather than gender. Clopton and Sorell (1993) found that when study subjects were limited to the domain of parenting dilemmas, the use of care versus justice reasoning

did not differ by sex. Gilligan herself has moved away from polemics regarding the value of decisions based on care versus justice, favoring instead a model characterized by musical metaphors (counterpoint, harmony, double fugue). Debate about her work partially centers around her lack of empiricism in favor of interpretation as well as whether an ethic of caring merely perpetuates an age-old stereotype that connotes the inferiority, or alternatively, the superiority of women (see e.g., Tronto, 1987).

8. Pocahontas' sacrifice makes her portrayal consistent with Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*. Belle's heroism centers on her self-sacrifice coupled with the helping/caring attribute, first manifested in her offer to be imprisoned in the Beast's castle in her father's place, then by staying to help the wounded beast instead of fleeing captivity, and finally by returning to the Beast's castle on the heels of an angry mob to warn him of danger. The pattern of self-sacrifice recognized in Disney characters like Belle (Henke et al., 1996) continues in later female leads like Pocahontas.

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