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Prisoners of History

Pocahontas, Mary Jemison, and the
Poetics of an American Myth

KARENNE WOOD

Anyone interested in history will admit that it's risky to take on the personas of historical characters—to impute motives to their actions, to “speak” for them, reimagining them as human beings apart from the narrative thread that delivers them to us. And yet what do we receive in most histories of Native people in the Americas during colonial times—characters pulled out of cultural context because those who wrote about them seldom knew or even tried to understand what it meant to be Native then? In popular culture, we receive worse: characters that have been manipulated to suit the agendas of media and marketing agencies, bearing little resemblance to their origins beyond their names.

As both a Native poet and a historical researcher, I am often caught in this dilemma, aware that the mainstream stories of our people are deeply flawed but unable to find more authentic accounts, usually because the American Indians remain voiceless or were deliberately silenced. This is particularly true for Native women—their daily activities and beliefs were of no interest to the colonial explorers and settlers whose accounts form the “primary sources” dear to American historians and teachers. And so it seems only right to go back to those accounts and to look for the Native voices, to try to learn more about them as people.

I've always found the story of Pocahontas troubling and avoided writing about her for that reason. In 2006 I visited Kent County, England, with a group of more than fifty Virginia Indians, and we saw the church at Gravesend where she is buried. In 2014 I was asked to speak about Pocahontas to the Jamestown Society in Los Angeles, because that year marked the four-hundredth anniversary of her marriage to John Rolfe. I chose to speak about the roles of Native women at that time in our region, an attempt to add cultural depth to her story. It seemed then that perhaps I had something to say about her life and the situation in which

she found herself from the perspective of a Virginia Indian woman, and so I wrote a poem. But first I researched what we know about her and her people, turning to recent books and articles by reputable scholars, ignoring stories from earlier times, which cast her as that Indian girl who saw English culture as inherently superior to her own and who “helped the white man” because she loved him.

I also found myself drawn to another Native woman, born 150 years or so later, known to American “frontier history” as Mary Jemison but not nearly as well known as Pocahontas. Interestingly, Mary Jemison was born white. And so I wrote about her, too. This essay is the story of these two women as I see it and the story of two poems that emerged from their experiences.

NOT QUITE THE FAIRY-TALE PRINCESS

In the summer of 2015 the Pamunkey Indian Tribe of Virginia received notice from the U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, that their efforts to obtain federal acknowledgment had finally met with success—permitting tribal members, for the first time in nearly four hundred years, to officially assert their claim as the descendants of the paramount chief Powhatan and his famous daughter, Pocahontas. All two hundred of them. In contrast, the non-Native Americans who also claim to descend from Pocahontas now number more than twenty thousand (Gleach 449). Many of them belong to an elite club that calls itself the FFV, the Founding Families of Virginia, as though no families lived here when the colonists arrived. Their grandparents and great-grandparents proclaimed descent from Pocahontas even during the period when anti-Indian sentiment was most virulent, when Virginia passed an antimiscegenation law known as the 1924 Racial Integrity Act. That law defined anyone with a drop of “Negro” blood as “colored” and felonized marriage between whites and persons of color. An exception was made, however, for those whose only non-Caucasian blood was one-sixteenth or less American Indian, to accommodate those wealthy and well-placed Virginians descended from Pocahontas (Rountree 221).

Pocahontas has long been the stuff of legend, dating back to Captain John Smith’s adventurous account of his visit to what is now Virginia in 1607. A year later he was gone, back to England, never to return to the mid-Atlantic region. The year of publication of his account, 1624,

is significant, as the majority of the other participants in his Virginia exploits had by then died; his earlier accounts do not mention the story that made Pocahontas famous. According to the 1624 account, Smith was captured by Powhatan’s war chief, Opechancanough, taken on a tour of Powhatan’s lands, and subjected to several rituals and perceived threats. He was then transported to Powhatan’s capital, Werowocomoco, where he was suddenly forced to put his head on a stone. When warriors raised clubs to smash his head, Pocahontas leaped in, laying her head on his and pleading for his life (Smith 150–51). Scholars generally now agree that if the event occurred at all, it was probably a ritual adoption, intended to bring Smith and the English colonists into the Powhatan polity to strengthen the Powhatans’ power and protect them from enemy tribes. Scholars and tribal members agree that Pocahontas was likely not present; because she was a child and would not have been permitted in council.

Smith departed for England, and Pocahontas went on with her life. She married a Patowomeck warrior named Kocoum and is thought to have had a child. Kocoum disappeared from the historical record, though, and Pocahontas was kidnapped by Samuel Argall with the help of Patowomeck people. Argall took her to Jamestown and then to another colonial settlement, Henricus, where she learned to dress and speak like an Englishwoman. Although her father paid the ransom the English demanded, they refused to return her. Her options were limited, and when the English gentleman John Rolfe declared his desire to make her his wife, she agreed. They were married in 1614, and she had one child, named Thomas. They visited England, where she died of an unknown disease. She was about twenty years old (Lopezina; Rountree).

AN ORIGINAL AMERICAN MYTH

The Pocahontas rescue story was popularized by English expatriate John Davis and gained momentum following the War of 1812 as Americans began to explore and develop a nascent history of their country. With the Indians of the East no longer a threat, the easterners were free to develop nostalgia, such as that evident in James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*. Poems and plays based on the Pocahontas rescue emerged, popularizing an attitude evident from one introduction: “Pocahontas is one of those characters, rarely appearing on the theatre

virtues idealized for Christian white women of the time—an American mother figure, a myth, decontextualized from her culture and her community, her personal circumstances ignored or transfigured. Even her name, Amonute, disappeared, along with her sacred name, Matoaka, and her Christian name, Rebecca. She remains Pocahontas, a nickname given to a child by her father that meant “wanton” or “mischievous.”

At the same time, she emerged in the American mindset as a beautiful, exotic female Other, desired by white men, a sexual model. In her article “The Pocahontas Perplex,” Rayna Green deftly traces the art history of this model from images of Caribbean queens published in 1575 to the emergent American Indian princess that represented Liberty before the image of Columbia supplanted her. As Camilla Townsend suggests, those models gave European men notions that America was a land waiting to be ravished and that Native women were available for the taking. Pocahontas was thus cast both as a demure, motherly figure and as an object of desire, a confounding notion that Green correctly characterizes as dysfunctional. In many of the later paintings representing her, Pocahontas’s skin appears white.

Even more confounding is the misperception most Americans have that it was John Smith, and not John Rolfe, whom Pocahontas loved and wished to marry. There is no evidence to substantiate any physical relationship between Pocahontas, a child of about eleven at the time, and Smith, who was a commoner and thus not permitted to consort with those he perceived as royalty (Gleach). The “love story” between them has continued to thrive as American legend, however. It emerged in 1958, when Peggy Lee covered “Fever,” an R&B tune that refers to a love affair between the two, and most notably in 1995, when Disney released its *Pocahontas* film, which featured John Smith as a tall blonde Ken-doll and Pocahontas as a willowy Asian-looking Native, clearly older than eleven. The love myth has continued to emanate from Hollywood, most recently in Terrence Malick’s boring film, *The New World* (2006), which starred Colin Farrell as Smith and Q’orianka Kilcher, age fourteen, as Pocahontas. It’s been profitable: the majority of American children know of Pocahontas through Disney’s film, and she remains their only contact with Virginia Indians of the past and present. Not only is she legendary, but she’s been commodified, animated into an indigenous object of sexual desire that pervades American mindsets and Halloween costumes long after elementary school (Ono and Buescher).

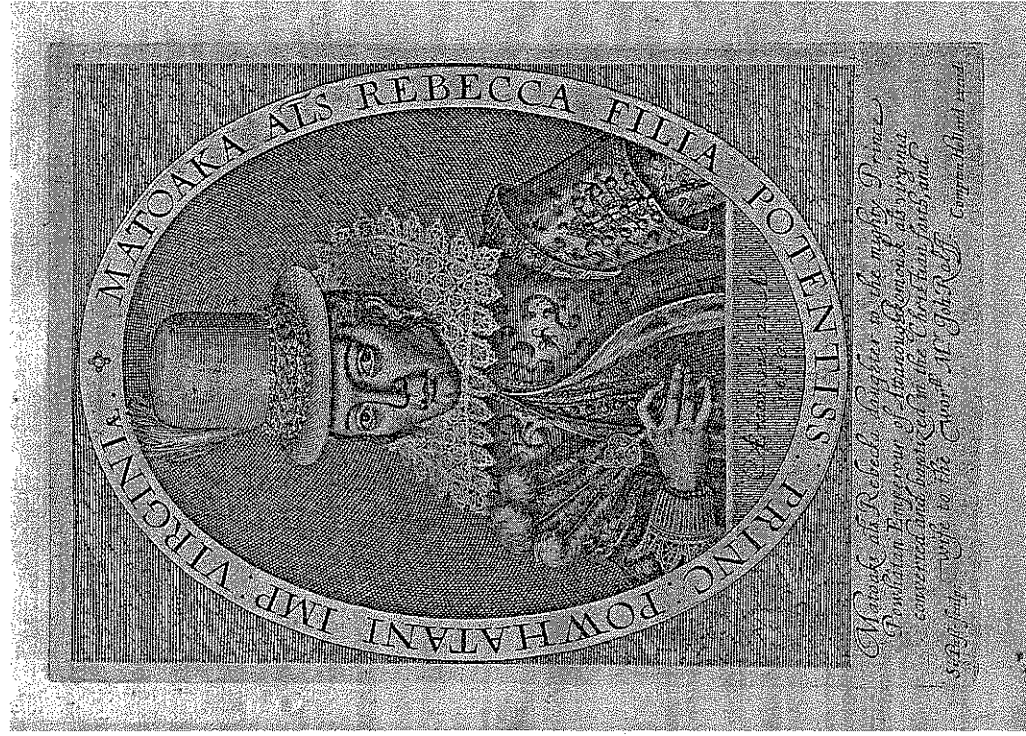


Fig. 1. The only image of Pocahontas made during her lifetime. Here her sacred name, Matoaka, and her English name, Rebecca, are noted.

of life, which no age can claim, no country appropriate. She is the property of mankind, serving as a beacon to light us on our way. . . . In Pocahontas we view the simple child of nature, prompted by her own native virtues alone, discharging the most generous acts of self-devotion” (Gleach, quoting William Watson Waldron, *Pocahontas, Princess of Virginia, and Other Poems* [1841], 9). Pocahontas came to embody those

“A MISSION TO PRESERVE”

All of this points to a disconcerting truth: while, until recently, American society has remained uncomfortable with the idea of race mixing through marriage, and some states, like Virginia, even outlawed that practice, the interracial union of Pocahontas and John Rolfe (or even Pocahontas and John Smith) is beyond question. Why is that? How did it happen that the four-hundredth anniversary of Pocahontas and Rolfe was publicly commemorated at Historic Jamestowne in 2014 (Lopezina) and celebrated by those Jamestowne Society members as far away as Los Angeles?

Drew Lopezina points out that colonial history, which is rooted in various forms of violence and oppression, often cloaks itself in the language of a benign and uncontested destiny. In this case, Historic Jamestowne—a site jointly owned by the National Park Service and the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities—states that its mission is “to preserve, protect and promote the original site of the first permanent English settlement in North America and to tell the story of the role of the three cultures, European, North American and African, that came together to lay the foundation for a uniquely American form of democratic government, language, free enterprise and society.” On the surface, the mission statement may seem innocuous—except that the order of “the three cultures” is chronologically flawed, and continents are not singular cultural groups. Embedded in it, however, is the notion that colonial institutions and cultural beliefs are inherently privileged, ignoring tribal removals, terminations, cultural suppression, language loss, even slavery and the Racial Integrity Act, which denied Virginia’s Native peoples a separate identity and cast them in the “colored” category—except for Pocahontas and those mostly Caucasian descendants of hers who are not Pamunkey tribal members.

MARY JEMISON: A HAPPIER ENDING

In contrast to the persistent legend and reframing of Pocahontas as an animated rather than a historical character, the story of De-he-wā-mis has vanished from mainstream American consciousness. She was born in 1743 as Mary Jemison to Irish parents on a ship en route to America. The story of her life, which she told to Reverend James Seaver as

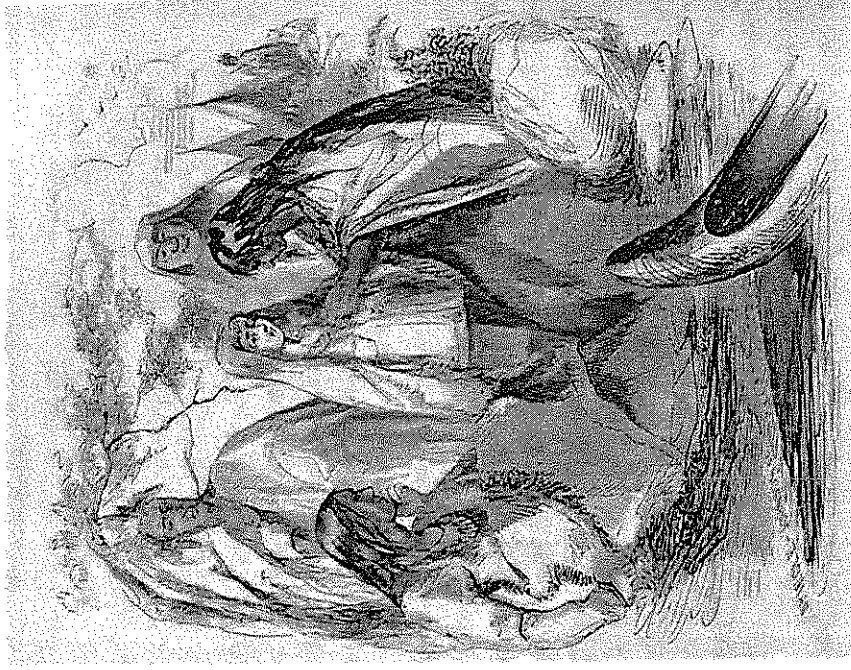


Fig. 2. *Mary Being Arrayed in Indian Costume* (with some funny-looking Senecas in the background and a canoe that resembles a large high-heeled shoe).

an elderly woman, was published as a “captivity narrative” and was immensely popular for decades afterward.

Mary grew up near what is now Marsh Creek, Pennsylvania, on land where her parents had squatted without the permission of the Haudenosaunee, or Iroquois, tribes whose homelands these were. In 1755, as tensions escalated between the French and British in what is erroneously called the French and Indian War, a party of French and Shawnee raiders captured Mary, then twelve, and her family. Mary and her younger brother were spared; the others were killed and scalped.

Two Seneca women adopted Mary; she married a Delaware man

named Sheninjee and had a son she called Thomas, after her father. Her husband died, and she married Hiakatoo, a Seneca warrior, with whom she had six children. She helped to negotiate terms for the Seneca following the Revolutionary War, when they were forced to cede land because they had supported the British. When the Seneca left the Genesee Valley in 1823, they reserved a parcel of land for Mary's use. She remained there until 1831, when she sold it and returned to her Indian people, among whom she died at the age of ninety (Seaver). Initially buried in the Seneca community at Buffalo Creek where she died, her remains were removed at the request of her descendants and relocated to the site of a Seneca council house on the estate of James Letchworth, today the site of a New York state park, where a bronze statue commemorates Jemison's life.

Given the opportunity several times to return to the world of white settlers, De-he-wā-mis chose to remain with her Indian family. Her name, however, appears in Seaver's 1824 narrative as Mrs. Mary Jemison—a conflated reflection that casts her status as a white woman who, although married to an Indian husband for decades, retains her first name and her maiden Irish surname rather than the Seneca name by which she was known. While there is evidence indicating that she chose to keep Jemison as a surname, the "Mrs." is interesting: Was that English convention her choice or Seaver's cultural assumptions at play?

Captivity narratives were popular in the nineteenth century and earlier because they detailed a traumatic lived experience that exposed violent confrontations between settlers and Native peoples, casting the former as victims and the latter as predators and obstacles to civilization. Originating with the story of "Mrs. Mary Rowlandson," who was captured by Pequots in Puritan times, the genre typically presented lurid details of grisly encounters between whites and Indians. "The Indian of the captivity narrative was the consummate villain, the beast who hatched fathers, smashed the skulls of infants, and carried off mothers to make them into squaws" (Wyss, quoting Roy Harvey Pearce, *The Savages of America* [1953], 58). These stories cast American women as pure and virtuous and their contact with "savages" as irreversible defilement, most likely through rape, because, according to cultural perspective, they would never have participated willingly. This condition was clear to Jemison, who states in her narrative that she could not endure the thought of herself and her children being ignored or despised by her

own relatives if she were ever to return to them. She also states that she loved her husband.

Although Jemison's story was initially published and presented to American readers as a captivity narrative, her voice is that of a Seneca woman. Susan Walsh and Karen Oakes argue persuasively that that voice stands in opposition to some of Seaver's editorializing, favoring Native practices and beliefs even when they conflict with those of colonial settlers and privileging the perspective of a female "cultural conservator," creating an autobiography that is quintessentially Native in nature.

CONCLUSION

In examining the circumstances of these two women, I was struck by some basic similarities: they were smart, resourceful, strong women who made the best of the difficulties they encountered. Both were abducted as teenagers, were married twice, named their first son Thomas. Both negotiated complicated circumstances during wartime, adapting to new languages and societies, as was the regional custom for captives of any race. Both were aware of their positions as outsiders and used their status to broker terms of peace for the Native people with whom they were affiliated.

Neither of these stories can be read in simple terms or as a "captivity narrative." Both women accepted their situations and managed to fit into their new societies. Neither renounced her origins, however: Pocahontas kept a circle of Native women around her even while living with Rolfe on a colonial farm; Jemison continued to practice speaking English and gave her children English names. Each seemed to have done the best she could. As such, perhaps we should consider them not as captives but as pioneers in the truest sense: those who went before us, endured difficulties, raised children, and helped to lead their people during times that, to us, remain unimaginable.

KARENNE WOOD (Monacan) directs Virginia Indian Programs at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. Her second book of poems, *Weaving the Bound-ary*, was recently published by the University of Arizona Press, Sun Tracks series. Wood's poems have appeared in the *Kenyon Review*, *Shenandoah*, and *Fulcrum: An Anthology of Poetry and Aesthetics*. She holds a Ph.D. in linguistic anthropology from the University of Virginia and an MFA in poetry from George Mason University. Her first book, *Markings on Earth*, won the North American Native Authors First Book award, and she has been named one of Virginia's Women in History.

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Amonute, 1617

KARENNE WOOD

Tsenacomoco. A place like no other, heart of all hearts, our center, that lime-green breast of a world.
 We were of it. Belonged to its waters, which spread west like fingers from Chesapeake, where saucer-sized oysters stacked themselves on underwater shelves and shad teemed upriver when trees budded, such as grew a hundred feet or higher: cypress, sycamore, chestnut, crowding out the understory. Where, at forest's edge, white dogwood blossoms shimmered like stars. Where our women dug *tuckahoe* tubers, pounded out bread, and planted their corn, beans and pumpkins with songs, according to the moon.
 My father, Powhatan, our *mananawick*, holiest of chiefs, who in his dreams entered all realms seeking our futures and who spoke with our priests the secret holy words, called me Pokahuntas, little Mischief. A nickname. He knew my name, Amonute.
 Wind from the east, with what portent, the day runners brought word
 of more ships with sails, pale strangers with hair on their faces like dogs?
 Watch them, Powhatan said. We heard tales: they tried to catch fish with flat pans, built a wall around their huts. Could not feed themselves.
 Opechancanough, our war chief, captured and brought us their leader.
 A squatty short man, face sprouting red fur. No one had seen such a man or heard his talk. My father exchanged boys with him.
 The white boy

would stay in our town. He and I traded words. I learned "house,"
yehakin.

"Bread," *ponap*. "Garment," *matchcore*. "Arrows," *attonce*.
Aroughcun, I taught him, that one with the black-striped tail.
Mockasin, supple buckskin, scent of woodsmoke.

I wanted more words. Went to their fort, to the redheaded man.

Chawnsmit, his name. He became my father's son, called him Father,
said

what was his would be ours. I learned to speak to him.

Ka ka torawincs yowo?

"What do you call this?"

And my father's question:

Casacunnakack, peya quagh acquintan vitasantasought?

"In how many days will there come more English ships?"

Then he left. Chawnsmit, our son. We were told he was wounded. He
had died, they said.

That Anglo tongue, my undoing. Years passed.

Oftentimes, we were fighting the strangers.

My husband Kocoum disappeared,

and his Patawomeck people sold me to Captain Argall for a copper
kettle.

I was to be ransomed. Was sent to Henricus

where the Reverend Whitaker, a dour man hunched like a buzzard,
instructed me in their words, their religion, and where

John Rolfe came to love me. Our people were at war. Would I marry
him,

he asked.

Would my father make peace? We said yes. I gave up my sacred
name,

Matoaka, she who kindles,

and I became Rebecca,

a biblical woman who left homeland for Canaan, married Abraham's
Isaac,

brought peace between enemies,

bore twins: the red Esau, who emerged first; and Jacob,

who through his mother's treachery inherited the land.

A few years of calm. We planted tobacco. I bore a son, Thomas.

Then another question: would I cross the sea, go to London, be their
emissary?

Yes, my father said. Go. We need to know more.

I saw Plymouth, then London. Felt its crowds press upon me, knew
its stench.

I saw that Chawnsmit.

He still lived. No son of ours. Heard their lies in his words.

Knew then that more of them would always come to us.

At last, when spring came and the winds turned, our ship left for
home.

I felt weak. I stumbled. We must stop, my husband said.

She is too ill to go on.

He cupped the bones of my face. Wiped my brow when delirium
swallowed me. Spoke gently.

Words.

Black words swirling like London's murmurations of starlings that
clouded the sky at dusk.

At home, my sisters pat out corn cakes and laugh. The elder calls to a
child

who splashes at river's edge, where the sand wears each stone
smooth.

Crenepo, woman.

Marowanchesso, boy.

Sukahanna, water.

On the shore, men scrape dugouts with oyster shells.

Acquintan, canoe.

Words. As though nothing had changed.

It is but the fevered dream of one who sleeps an ocean away.

Tsenacomoco.

We thought it the center of the world.

land. Told my life to a preacher, who called it a
 "captivity story."
 Sold the land, joined my family. I have not
 lived imprisoned; I am not just Mary Jemison now.
 At ninety, a woman with choices, I was once made
 a relative. Taught to be human. It has been enough.

KARENNE WOOD (Monacan) directs Virginia Indian Programs at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. Her second book of poems, *Weaving the Bound-ary*, was recently published by the University of Arizona Press, Sun Tracks series. Wood's poems have appeared in the *Kenyon Review*, *Shenandoah*, and *Fulcrum: An Anthology of Poetry and Aesthetics*. She holds a Ph.D. in linguistic anthropology from the University of Virginia and an MFA in Poetry from George Mason University. Her first book, *Markings on Earth*, won the North American Native Authors First Book award, and she has been named one of Virginia's Women in History.

De-he-wā-mis

(1743-1833)

KARENNE WOOD

Born at sea, I have lived between worlds: Ireland
 to America, a farm hacked from forest; the family
 attacked, captured, marched to Fort Duquesne.
 French and Shawnee men dancing, my mother's red
 hair on a scalp pole, bright fires.
 Two Seneca women
 canoed me downriver to a town of longhouses, past
 burned heads and body parts mounted on spits. Took me
 as sister, gave me a name: De-he-wā-mis, "pretty girl,"
 or "pleasant thing."
 I have tried to be pleasant. Did as I
 was asked. Practiced speaking English when alone,
 recited my catechism. Named my son Thomas after
 the father I'd loved. Buried a husband who fell ill
 while hunting, married again, had six more children,
 all with English names.
 Another war, our people
 forced to choose sides. Americans burned our towns.
 At the Treaty of Big Tree, I spoke to the white men, and
 we got better terms.
 Buried a daughter, my three sons,
 my husband. Alcohol. Fighting. Consumption. A landslide.
 There were too many whites. Our chiefs chose to leave
 for Buffalo Creek. My brother asked if I'd stay or return
 to an English-speaking world I'd not known for 40 years.
 What would life be among them, how could we belong?
 The whites claimed me but not my daughters. Not my Indian
 brother, whom I cried for days to lose. I stayed, on my own