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TRANSLATING VALUES: MERCANTILISM AND THE MANY “BIOGRAPHIES” OF POCAHONTAS

MICHAEL TRATNER

The US is founded on the translation of persons: Europeans into Americans, and Indians into “domestic dependant nations,” in the famous phrase of Justice Marshall in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* in 1831. The story of Pocahontas embodies this latter transformation, as she is transformed from an Algonquin princess to a dependant of the British John Rolfe. Note that I said John Rolfe, not John Smith, for Rolfe is the man she married, the one who took her to England and inherited land from her. And here is the odd question I want to explore: Why would this romance between Rolfe and Pocahontas that so obviously justifies the transfer of Indian lands to British custody be replaced by the story of a brief, passing interaction between John Smith and Pocahontas, a story with no clear resolution?

I propose that the reason has much to do with an economic theory of the seventeenth century known as Mercantilism, and I think this economic theory should have a central place in the study of translation, because Mercantilism is based almost entirely on “translation”—on a shift in the meaning or value of an object when it moves from one culture to another. The prime directive of Mercantilism is stated directly in the title of the most influential treatise on the subject, by John Mun published posthumously in 1640, “The Ballance of our Forraign Trade is The Rule of our Treasure.” What Mercantilism means by a favorable balance of trade is that you end up having more value in your possession after you trade than you did before, and it is the change in value of objects as they cross borders that accomplishes this goal. As Valerie Forman puts it, “wares had power precisely because they were differently valued in Europe than in the Indies and thus could be sold at a profit” (615). And not just one transfer—merchants trade wool from England for sugar from the Indies and then trade the sugar for wine from France. Mun

summarizes the process: “by a continual and orderly change of one into the other grow rich” (qtd. in Forman 615).

But mercantilist exchange is dangerous, as Forman notes: “what becomes visible in . . . [Mercantilist] tracts and documents is that wares and money not only have the ability to transform into each other, but like clothing they have transformative powers” (617). When in contact with foreign commodities, instead of the commodity being translated into a domestic product, a person might find herself translated into a foreign culture. This power of wares to transform people is an important part of the Mercantile process: when a merchant brings a commodity into a foreign culture, he hopes that desires for that commodity will be so strong that the foreigners will lose control of their own values. The question in a Mercantile confrontation is often, “who will lose control, us or them?” But this maintenance of one’s values is not easy, and in fact in the early modern conception of humanity is never completely successful. Travel and contact with other cultures always “translates” the merchant into something not quite British.

There is then another element needed to make Mercantilism work, and that is a strong ruler who can maintain the domestic regime intact as foreign goods and merchants who have been altered by travel flow in and out. Mun ends his essay by speaking of the importance of the Prince taxing the merchants to pay for military and policing powers to maintain strong boundaries and internal cohesion of the domestic regime. Mun is quite concerned about how much the prince should tax merchants, and his answer is “the gain of their Forraign Trade must be the rule of laying up their treasure” (42). In other words, all the clever gains the Merchants make should eventually be given over to the prince as treasure. In effect, the gain is a measure of the difference between the foreign and the domestic, and giving this gain to the Prince rather symbolically restores to the merchant what was originally present—returns him to his Britishness, we might say. So taxing ends the process of translation—or we might say it creates the very ground of the process. For only when there is a powerful prince can there be a domestic regime strong enough to not get itself “translated” by the process of foreign exchange. A number of economic historians have thus argued then that “the driving force of mercantilism” was not wealth at all, but rather “the transformation of feudal structures into modern states” (Ekelund and Tollison 11)—the shift from familial to national identity. The “self-control” of the successful merchant is a product of his devotion to his Prince, to his nation, and not a result of his personal strength.

Pocahontas appears in history at the center of the Mercantilist era, and the earliest versions of the Pocahontas story were directly aimed at Mercantilist ends, as David Stymeist notes in an article entitled, “Strange Wives: Pocahontas in Early Modern Colonial Advertisement.” Pocahontas’s marriage to

John Rolfe was advertised as the embodiment of the promise of Virginia; for example, a 1615 brochure by Ralphe Hamor indicates the parallelism between the colony and the marriage in its title: “A true discourse of the present estate of Virginia, and the successe of the affaires there . . . Together with a relation of . . . the christening of Powhatans daughter and her marriage with an English-man.” Pocahontas’s story became a reference in popular dramas, such as the 1605 work *Eastward Hoe*, by Chapman, Jonson, and Marston, in which some taverngoers declare that colonists “have married with the Indian . . . and make ’em bring forth as beautiful faces as any we have in England, and therefore the Indians are so in love with ’em that all the treasure they have they lay at their feet” (qtd. in Stymeist 110).

While the Indians are described as falling into a love that causes them to give away treasure, the British in these works are presented as always able to control their own emotions. This justifies colonial expansion, as the British aren’t then “using” the Indians. Walter Raleigh attributes the success of British efforts to convert Indians to this power of self-control, contrasting it to the acts of other colonizers such as the Spanish. In a semi-fictional account of his ventures in the Americas, he writes that natives

began to conceive the deceit and purpose of the Spaniards, who indeed (as they confessed) tooke from them both their wives and daughters daily, and used them for the satisfying of their owne lusts, especially such as they tooke in this maner by strength. . . . I neither know nor believe, that any of our companie, by violence or other wise, ever knew any of their women, and yet we saw many hundreds, and had many in our power, and those very young, and excellently favored which came among us without deceit, starke naked. Nothing gave us more love among them than this usage, for I suffered not anie man so much as to offer to touch any of their wives or daughters. (qtd. in Stymeist 114)

It might seem then that John Rolfe could never have married Pocahontas. But Rolfe found a way: he wrote a letter asking permission of the royal governor of the colony, saying that he was in “no way led . . . with the unbridled desire of carnall affection” (qtd. in Stymeist 113–14); he wanted to marry just to convert her and expand the British nation. Rolfe had to get permission from the ruler to marry in order to make it very clear that he was not acting like the Spaniards, nor was he “going native.” Rolfe in effect claimed that what seduced Pocahontas was the glory of Britain, not him.

In Rolfe’s letter and Hamor’s account of the marriage, there is no mention of John Smith, though Smith had already published an account of his adventures in America. After Hamor’s treatise, Smith capitalized on Pocahontas’s celebrity, publishing several new versions of his travels highlighting her role. But since he did not marry her or gain any treasure from her,

Smith has to develop a different claim to make his role glorious in the story, and what he emphasizes is that though Indians admired and even fell in love with him, he never was tempted, though others such as Rolfe clearly were. I suggest that Smith's accounts are efforts to portray himself far more as the Prince in the drama of Mercantilism than as a merchant, and this fits with his overtly stated goal in writing his accounts—he is trying to win himself stature as a gentleman. In Smith's first accounts, he devotes very little to the scene of Pocahontas saving him and much more to a later scene of her being offered to him sexually by the Chief along with some thirty other young women—all of whom he refuses.

Needless to say, the story of Pocahontas which has been passed down to today is not this tale of a proposed orgy, nor is it Rolfe's tale of a faithful wife. The transformation of the Pocahontas story to the familiar story we know happens about the time of the founding of the US. The first extended account of the romance of Smith and Pocahontas is published in 1805 by John Davis, almost two centuries after Rolfe's and Smith's encounters, and in Davis's version we can see more fully how Smith has taken over the role of an authority who is the source of the British self-control.

Davis starts his tale with the scene of Smith captured and brought into the Indian camp, where not only Pocahontas but all the Indian women are excited: "When Smith appeared before Powhatan, the first impression he made decided favorably for him on the minds of the women" (44). Pocahontas saves Smith because "The flame of love was now lighted up in the bosom of the Indian maid" (48). She leads Smith into the woods, to "endeavour to learn by signs whether he was content to be with her, or again wanted to cross the widerolling ocean" (49). But Smith's "smiles [were] . . . not those of passion. The object of his heart was the colony he had founded" (49). Smith is totally devoted to the colony, to the regime; he is beyond personal passions, and so is in effect in the position of the ruler.

Davis goes on to other scenes showing Smith's power over both Indian and British emotions. There came a day when the colonists were about to die from lack of goods. The British try to save themselves by trading with Powhatan, but Powhatan asks the British to put all their goods out so he can see them, and then he says he will give them just a few cheap things in return. The narrator says this is Powhatan's trick; Powhatan has recognized the intensity of the British need for Indian goods, and so treats the colonists as the ones whose passions are out of control. But then Smith plays a trick of his own: he accidentally lets some pretty blue beads slip out of a bag, and instantly, "The imagination of the Indian monarch was inflamed, and he made large offers. . . . Smith . . . at length exchanged a pound of blue beads for five hundred bushels of corn" (75).

Smith's trick saves the colony. Notice the parallels between the incident of the blue beads and the incident of Pocahontas saving Smith's life: in both cases Indians are "inflamed" with passion by the sight of something unfamiliar to them, and Smith thereby gains something while giving nothing or very little in return.

In the account of the blue beads, Smith has to correct the other colonists, restoring their self-control. Smith has to perform this function repeatedly. In another instance, the colonists try to win favor with Powhatan by giving him gifts, but these "present[s] did not meet with the approbation of Captain Smith. With a few gaudy beads he could have levied contribution on Powhatan; whereas a profusion of presents would only increase his pride and insolence" (78). Lavish gifts reveal the colonists' need to please Powhatan: what Smith wants to create is the illusion that the British are self-sufficient, and thereby create a desire in Powhatan to please the British.

What I am saying here is that Smith represents in this 1805 account by John Davis the ability to drive Indians out of control and the ability to keep the British in control. He represents, then, the crucial function of the ruler of a nation engaging in Mercantile exchange. The value of Smith to the history of the US is not then his passion but rather his ability to transcend passions in order to support and maintain a colony.

In Davis's account, Rolfe plays the role of the merchant who actually carries treasure from foreign lands, and who is thus in danger of losing control of himself: as Davis puts it, upon meeting Pocahontas, "the breast of Rolfe yielded to the empire of his passion" (91). To maintain control over himself, Rolfe does not act on his passion until he gains permission from the colonial ruler (no longer Smith at that time). Then he marries and takes Pocahontas to London, where she sees Smith again in a poignant climax to the tale: she feels sad, dies, and Rolfe inherits vast tracts of land. Smith becomes in this tale the impersonal, untouchable object of worship, the image of the nation, while Rolfe is the person who risks getting involved with the foreign and who brings valuable material home with him. In Davis's account, I suggest, Smith is a kind of monumental figure representing the founding of the US.

Smith never thought of himself as founding a new nation, because of course in the 1600s there was no thought of separating the colony from England. But there is nonetheless in Smith's accounts of his travels much that we can see provided fodder for later readers to see in him the image of a new country, not just a traveling Englishman. For one thing, he presents himself as someone who loses his Britishness in his travels and then regains it in America—and he recommends America as a general cure for Englishmen who have lost their culture because of the infections of travel. America becomes then not simply an extension of England, but a restored England, a New England.

The attractiveness to women that saves Smith in America is earlier in his career the cause of his loss of Englishness, as Jim Egan traces in an essay about Smith and English-American identity. When Smith was off trying to fight the Turks, a woman named Chratza Tragabigzanda, the sister of the leader of a group of Turks, falls for him and hatches a plan to marry him. But instead of causing her to convert to British culture, her passion causes her to attempt to convert Smith to Turkish culture by dressing him as a Turkish servant in the household of her brother. The brother discovers Smith and makes him a slave, stripped naked, with his head shaved, and for a time he is “no more regarded than a beast” (qtd. in Egan 114). In other words, in this earlier episode in which he enflamed a foreigner, it is Smith who gets translated from an object of value into a piece of junk, a trinket, in the other culture.

Smith eventually escapes and proves his Englishness by cutting heads off Turks—and then later gains his greatest fame by saving his own head from being cut off by enflaming Pochahantas. Smith uses the combination of his Turkish and American adventures to present a way for Englishmen to survive dangerous cultural contacts that threaten to “translate” Englishness into something else. Egan concludes that in Smith’s accounts, “American geographic space harbors the power to restore a body to its rightful, one might even say ‘natural,’ identity” (115). This ability to restore identity is possible only because the “English people have literally transformed the environment,” changing the New World from a place “most intemperate and contagious” by cutting down tall trees and draining wetlands, so that “the Sunne hath power to exhale up the moyst vapours of the earth . . . which before it could not, being covered with spreading tops of high trees” (qtd. in Egan 115). In the humoral conceptions of the early Modern era, lands and people alike gain their character from the four humors, and adjusting the wetness and the heat of the surroundings translates the character of the land itself from Indian to English. By saying that the land itself changes from “intemperate” to “healthful,” Smith implies that the land is itself being restored to its proper character, and from then on the land functions to restore those who have lost their Englishness in foreign travels. Smith is not at all presenting America as a new country, but his account is easily adapted to become one of the quintessential stories the US tells about itself: that it is a land that can cure Europeans who are sick of their original cultures by restoring them to a New Europeanness which is Americanness.

The recent movie versions of this tale—the Disney animated story and Terence Malick’s artsy *The New World*—complete this logic: these movies are not about the translation of Pocahontas at all, but rather about the translation of John Smith from British to American. One key shift marks this: in both these movies, unlike the seventeenth and eighteenth century versions, John

Smith definitely falls in love with Pocahontas, and is devastated when they have to separate. This might seem to undermine the Mercantile story I have been setting up, but there is another way to understand what these later versions are doing, a theory proposed by my son Jeffrey Tratner. Jeffrey argues that what has happened is that the recent movies are reversing the sense of what is foreign and what is domestic. These movies present the British John Smith as the foreigner who falls in love with the beautiful American woman and the beautiful American land, the foreigner whose passion changes his culture. It is John Smith who is “converted” into an American by his relationship with Pocahontas (and so ends up somewhat alienated from his British fellow colonists)—and it is John Smith who at the end disappears back to the unseen “there,” the foreign place that is Britain. In these movies, viewers are encouraged to identify with the land and with the natives who encounter the “foreign” John Smith. As evidence, consider the two illustrations on the next page of the clothing of Pocahontas and John Smith, as provided in paper dolls sold by Disney™.

I think it is clear that Pocahontas seems far more modern and far more American in her initial Indian dress—rather like a tube top and short skirt—than she does in her final “British” garb. The clothes reveal that when Pocahontas becomes British she is becoming “foreign” to herself and to us as viewers. John Smith is transformed the other way: he starts dressed in strange, we might say “foreign” clothes—even wearing metal—but we can see that when stripped of these clothes, he seems quite the modern American hunk—he becomes like “us” when he loses his Britishness and “goes native.”

In the Disney movie, the Mercantile transfer of value does not take the form of land moving from the Indians to the British, as it did in the early version of the Pocahontas tale; rather, in the movie the transfer is the infusion of language and British culture to the land itself. This is of course the new mercantile version of the US: it is not a place translated from some other culture; rather, it is the perfectly natural place that inspires passions in everyone else, and causes them to give over their cultural products to the US. No matter what culture originally created something or someone, that thing or person actually gains its most valuable, most natural state when brought to the US. Thus we come to the most recent form of Mercantilism, Neoconservatism, which posits that if dictators and evil rulers can be removed, all people will just naturally want to become like the US to increase their value. Becoming like the US, becoming American in this new version of Mercantilism, is not being translated at all; rather, it is a process of “untranslating,” of stripping off the strange artificial exterior provided by another culture to do just what John Smith promised America would do, restore “a body to its rightful, one might even say ‘natural,’ identity.”



Paper dolls and costumes of Pocahontas and John Smith, from *Disney's Pocahontas Paper Doll*.

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