

Pocahontas-Matoaka

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OF ALL AMERICAN NAMES probably none have acquired more romantic glamour than those of the Indian girl who died in 1617 in England. Phantastic stories have been woven around her personality. Misconceptions about her two names, Pocahontas and Matoaka, have served to contribute to the mythical character she has assumed in history. Most scholars consider these two names to have almost identical meanings. In their cultural context such similarity, though literally correct, appears superficial. They are not derived from the same root. They were bestowed at different times for fundamentally different purposes in fundamentally different manners.

Well-grounded traits in the stable Powhatan cultural complex are revealed by William Strachey in his *The Historie of Travaile Into Virginia, Britannia* (Ashmolean mss. c. 1610-13, published by The Hakluyt Society, London, 1849). We find the following pertinent native usages. All marriages with tribal chief-men ended as soon as the first child was born and weaned. Then the mother, like a modern divorcee without loss of caste, left the child with its father, returned to her own people, and was free to marry again. But custom forbade her to live in the same village with her former chief-man husband and their child again.

Thus, at a most tender age (for children were weaned from one to possibly three years after birth) this girl became wholly Powhatan's daughter. Evidence strongly indicates that Powhatan gave her the name Pocahontas. It appears certain that he later bestowed the name Matoaka on her. From her weaning on, without her mother to care for her, this child was always somewhat on her own in a polygamous household, wherein were some nineteen half-brothers of all ages, an unknown number of half-sisters (including at least one younger than she), perhaps, a few barren wives, and a

succession of new young wives—all of them striving to be first in the eyes of Powhatan.

To be happy in such a household one had to adjust one's character to conflicting and different personalities on all occasions, keep in good grace with the chief-man father, and refrain from giving serious offense to anyone. That this girl made many more correct, than incorrect responses to particular situations is attested by abundant narrative evidence. At the age of eleven or twelve she was by repute "Powhatan's dearest daughter."

Custom decreed that each child have at least two names. The first was bestowed at random to fit the fancy of the parent. It was the name customarily used thereafter. Choice of the second was an important and serious matter. Efforts were made to find one descriptive of some physical or personality trait, by which the individual might be recognized as long as he lived. Such permanent names—to be used on formal occasions—were bestowed at puberty rites. In the case of a girl her hair was cut in short bangs over forehead and temples to denote that she had become a marriageable woman, and she donned for the first time a doe-skin shirt of apron length. So seriously did most girls take these rituals that, although they had gone completely nude before, they immediately became, and thereafter, remained very much embarrassed to be seen wholly naked by anyone—including other girls and women.

Chief-men consulted priests about almost everything. Almost literally everything a Powhatan thought, said, or did, had some primitive religious significance. Religions were, perhaps, the strongest influences in creating and maintaining the genius of the Powhatan cultural configuration. Since such second names were in the nature of prophecies of the future man or woman, one may assume some priest was consulted prior to a definite choice of any such permanent name. One may be reasonably certain priests approved the name Matoaka.

John Smith stated, as if it were a fact, that these Indians kept such names secret, lest enemies, who knew them, might magically injure those who bore them. His own narratives and those of others report facts which are wholly inconsistent with any such superstitious traits among the Powhatans. Over thirty such names of individual Powhatans appear in various narratives. In this particular case, indisputable evidence furnishes a satisfactory explana-

tion of why the English did not learn the name Matoaka earlier: she never appeared in Jamestown until January, 1608. For an indefinite period after that she often came wholly naked and played cartwheels with English boys. The truth is: Pocahontas did not go through the puberty ritual until months after January, 1608. No one heard her second name sooner, because it had not been bestowed upon her. So, what Smith stated on this score, as if it were a fact, is revealed as no more than an erroneous opinion.

As reflected by these name-traits and the circumstantial and cultural environment wherein they were given and used, the established etymologies take on the precise differences Mr. Strachey sensed in them:

Pocahontas, for *Pocahontes*, a form of *pokachantesu*, literally 'she is playful,' relates to her early repute of preference for active boyish games; rendered freely, but specifically, 'little wanton,' it is the 17th century equivalent of modern 'little tomboy.' One etymologist consulted considers it possible that the Powhatan form Pocahontas might be 'she plays with boys'; but this is not proved.

Matoaka, from *metaw*, 'to play,' whence *metawke*, 'she amuses herself playing (with something or others),' is a little more difficult to explain. Primitives have only a few generic and abstract terms. So when they wish to connote abstract qualities, such as pleasantness of character, they are forced to do so by reference to some specific relationship wherein such a characteristic is evident. To amuse oneself is to have pleasant sensations, to feel pleasant and to radiate pleasantness. To play with others is to give them pleasant sensations. We would have no difficulty in identifying an individual with such characteristics as a 'pleasant personality.' That happens to be the precise significance Mr. Strachey sensed in Matoaka. For he identified it as the equivalent of *amonate*, a variation of *amoenite*, a 17th century term to signify one whose chief characteristic is 'pleasantness of personality.'

It seems certain that much of her childhood and most of her adult life were spent in serving and pleasing others. Largely by the capacity to please others, she won esteem and advanced from her savage wilderness to the foot of the throne of Queen Anne. Her second name proved to be prophetic. It is pleasant to recall her these three hundred and more years since the earth of England took her form to its bosom.