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Fourth Edition

# THROUGH WOMEN'S EYES

An American History  
WITH DOCUMENTS

Ellen Carol DuBois

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
LOS ANGELES

Lynn Dumenil

OCCIDENTAL COLLEGE

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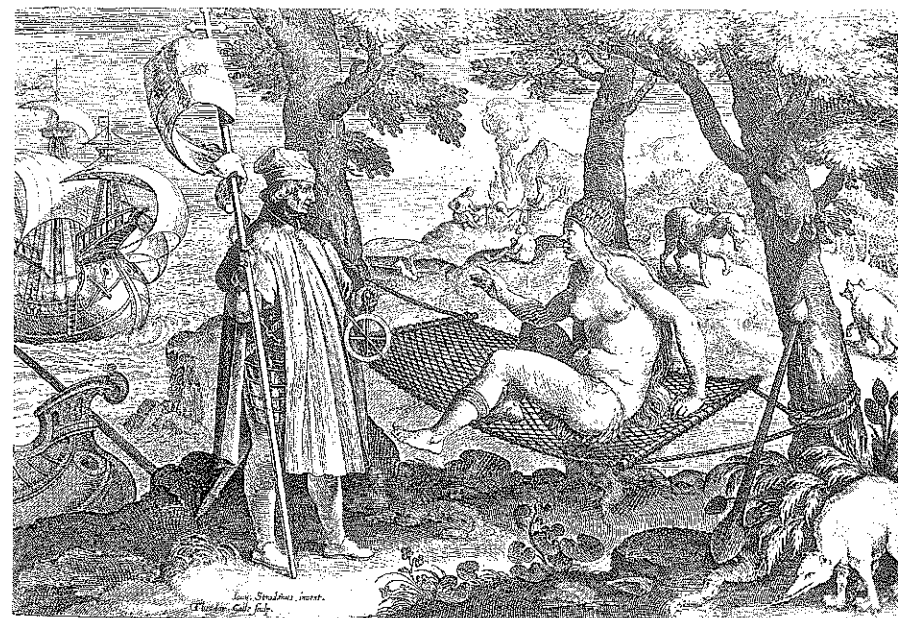
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## PRIMARY SOURCES

## European Images of Native American Women

IN EXPLORING THE LIVES OF early Native American women, historians rely on the images and narratives produced by Europeans eager to describe the peoples they encountered in what they viewed as the New World. How does this essay on European images of Native women reveal the advantages and limitations of such sources in conveying women's lives accurately and clearly?

Europeans' representations of Native American women tell us about European perceptions of their conquest of the Americas. However, depending on the artist, and with careful critical tools, we can also learn about the women depicted. Figure 1.1 uses allegory, a device common in Western European art—employing the female form to symbolize a country or abstract qualities



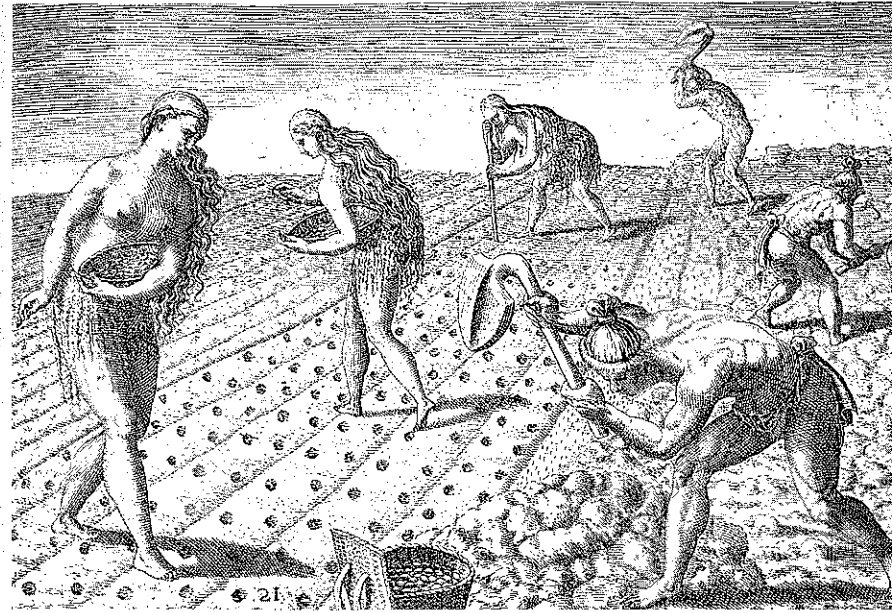
America. Semel vocavit inde semper excitam.

◆ Figure 1.1 Theodor Galle, *America* (c. 1580)  
Private Collection/Stapleton Collection/Bridgeman Images.

such as virtue or liberty. Images of America represented by an idealized Native American woman were highly popular in Europe. The illustration here, titled *America*, is an engraving created around 1580 by Flemish engraver Theodor Galle, based on a drawing from around 1574 by Jan van der Straet. The striking image represents Amerigo Vespucci, the Italian explorer whose name was eventually given to the land mass he first explored in 1499,<sup>o</sup> as he “awakens” America. The animal at bottom right is a sloth, and in the background naked people are roasting a human leg on a spit, indicating the widespread belief that American Natives were uncivilized, barbaric, and cannibalistic. The engraving projects America as a bountiful land, but with savage peoples. The phrase in Latin may be translated in two ways: “Amerigo rediscovers America; he called her once and thenceforth she was always awake” or “Amerigo laid bare America; once he called her and thenceforth she was always aroused.” How might these different translations elicit different interpretations of the engraving? What is the significance of Vespucci’s being clothed and standing while the woman representing America is largely naked and reclining? Why would Europeans choose to depict America as a woman? What does the engraving reveal about European society and values?

More helpful to us in understanding the reality of indigenous women’s lives are the illustrations and descriptions made by Europeans who encountered them in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Often these accounts aimed to promote enthusiasm and funding for exploration, colonization, or missionary activity, so they presented Native American peoples in ways that would appeal to their readers. But they also reflect their artists’ ethnographic intentions to record, with more or less accuracy, the appearance and ways of strange new peoples. Publications such as Theodor de Bry’s multivolume *Great Voyages* (1590) provided texts with illustrations detailing geography, information about flora and fauna, and accounts of Native peoples. A native of Flanders, de Bry had a fervent interest in promoting the colonization schemes of Protestant nations on a continent where the Catholic French and Spanish had already established a foothold. His depiction in Figure 1.2 must be analyzed with his point of view and purpose in mind. The image is based on the work of artist Jacques Le Moyne de Morgues, who had spent time in Florida when the French had an outpost there. The drawing purports to describe the Timucua, a Muskogean-speaking people. Timucuas were a matrilineal, agricultural people who raised corn, beans, and squash. Scholars believe that details in this image such as the dress, the baskets, and the sticks used to punch holes in the ground for planting may be accurate, but the straight rows are apparently modeled after the plowed fields of Europe, and the hoes depicted are Flemish tools. The bodies of the women themselves reflect European ideas of classical beauty (female nudes were common in European painting). What does this image suggest about the Timucuas’ sexual division of labor?

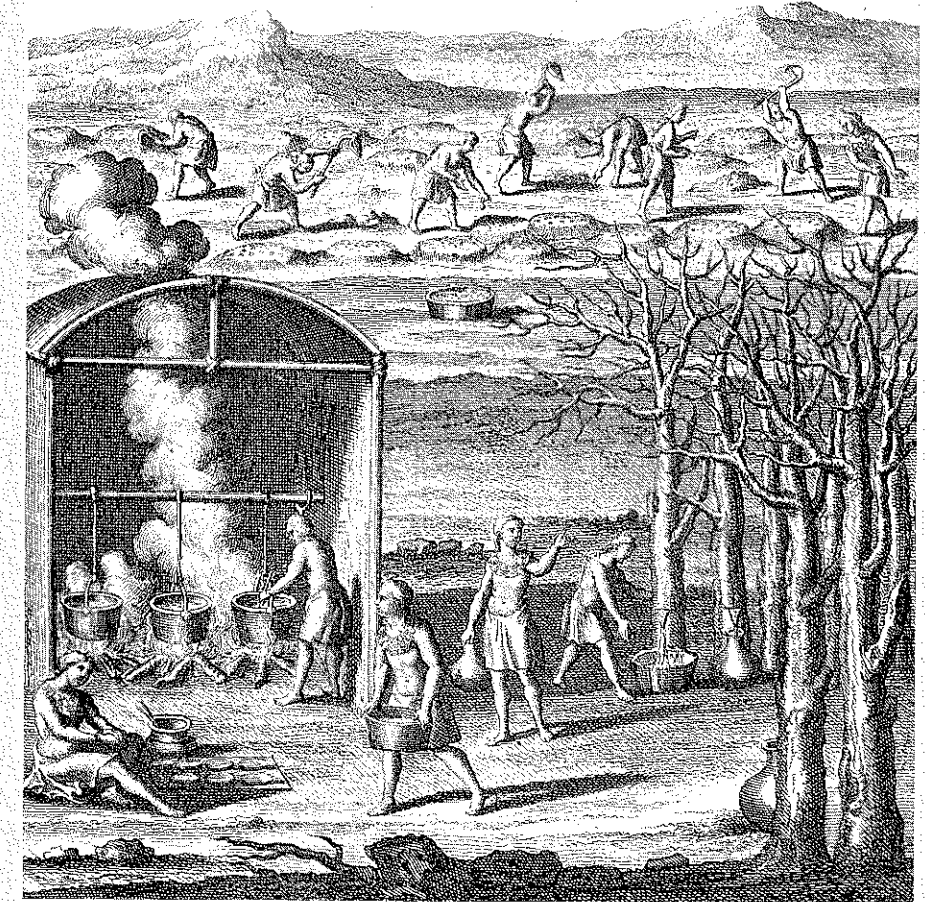
<sup>o</sup> Historians dispute the exact year of Vespucci’s arrival in the Americas.



◆ Figure 1.2 Indians Planting Corn, from Theodor de Bry, *Great Voyages* (1590)  
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

A much later depiction of women's work (Figure 1.3) appeared in *Moeurs des Sauvages Amérindiens* (1724) by Joseph-François Lafitau, a Jesuit missionary in the region of Montreal, Canada. It is included here because there are no such depictions of Iroquois women's traditional work in the Great Lakes area from the sixteenth century. Accompanying his illustration of Canadian Iroquois women making maple sugar, Lafitau wrote, "The women are busy going to get the vessels which are already full of the sap which drips from the trees, taking this sap and pouring it into the kettles which are on the fire. One woman is watching over the kettles while another one, seated, is kneading with her hands this sap which is thickening and in condition to be put in the shape of sugar loaves. Beyond the camp and the woods appear the fields as they look at the end of winter. We can see the women busy putting the fields into shape for the first time and sowing their corn."<sup>19</sup> What does this drawing and description suggest about the work patterns of these Iroquois women? What are the similarities and differences with Figure 1.2?

Undoubtedly the most comprehensive set of sixteenth-century North American drawings are those of John White, who was not only the most prolific and accomplished European artist of the New World but also governor of Roanoke, the first English attempt at settlement on the North American continent (see pp. 22–24). Sir Walter Raleigh commissioned White to illustrate plant and animal life and the



◆ Figure 1.3 Canadian Iroquois Women Making Maple Sugar, from Joseph-François Lafitau, *Moeurs des Sauvages Amérindiens* (1724)  
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

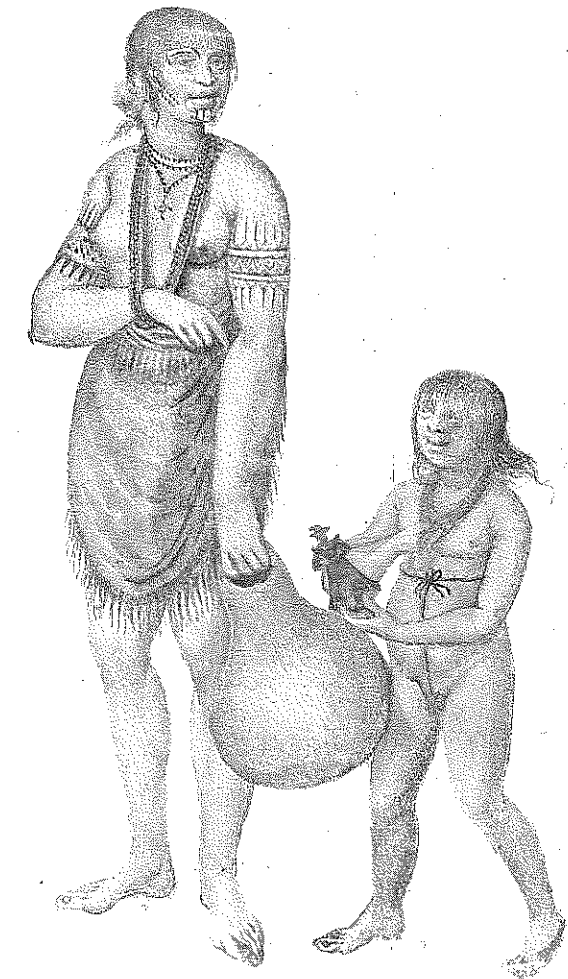
Native peoples encountered in the three Roanoke voyages of 1584–1590. White's extraordinary watercolors, such as Figure 1.4 (p. 38), appear to have been accurately drawn from his careful observations of the coastal Algonquians, who lived on the Outer Banks of today's North Carolina. Among most Algonquian peoples, men and women ate separately, although these Carolinians seem to have had different practices. Who may have made the mat on which the couple sits? "They are very sober in their eatinge, and drinkinge, and consequentelye verve longe lived because they doe not oppress nature," Thomas Harriot wrote in the accompanying text.<sup>20</sup> How is White's admiration for these people portrayed visually?



◆ Figure 1.4 John White, *Theire sitting at meate* (c. 1585–1586)  
The Granger Collection, New York.

White's detailed depiction of clothing and ornamentation is particularly valuable. Why might the English have been so interested in such details? Figure 1.5 (p. 39), *A Chief Lady of Pomeiooc and Her Daughter*, features the wife of the chief in an Algonquian town in what is now North Carolina. Although not clear from the drawing, the accompanying text indicates that the marks on the woman's arms and face are "pounced," or tattooed.<sup>21</sup> In what other ways has the woman decorated herself? Her fringed skirt is made of skins and covers her front only, not her back. She is wearing a three-strand necklace, probably made of pearls and/or copper, hanging to her waist. Her daughter also wears a beaded necklace and, though it is hard to see, a skin covering her genitals. She carries a doll—a European one, dressed in Elizabethan clothing. What is the significance of the inclusion of this European item?

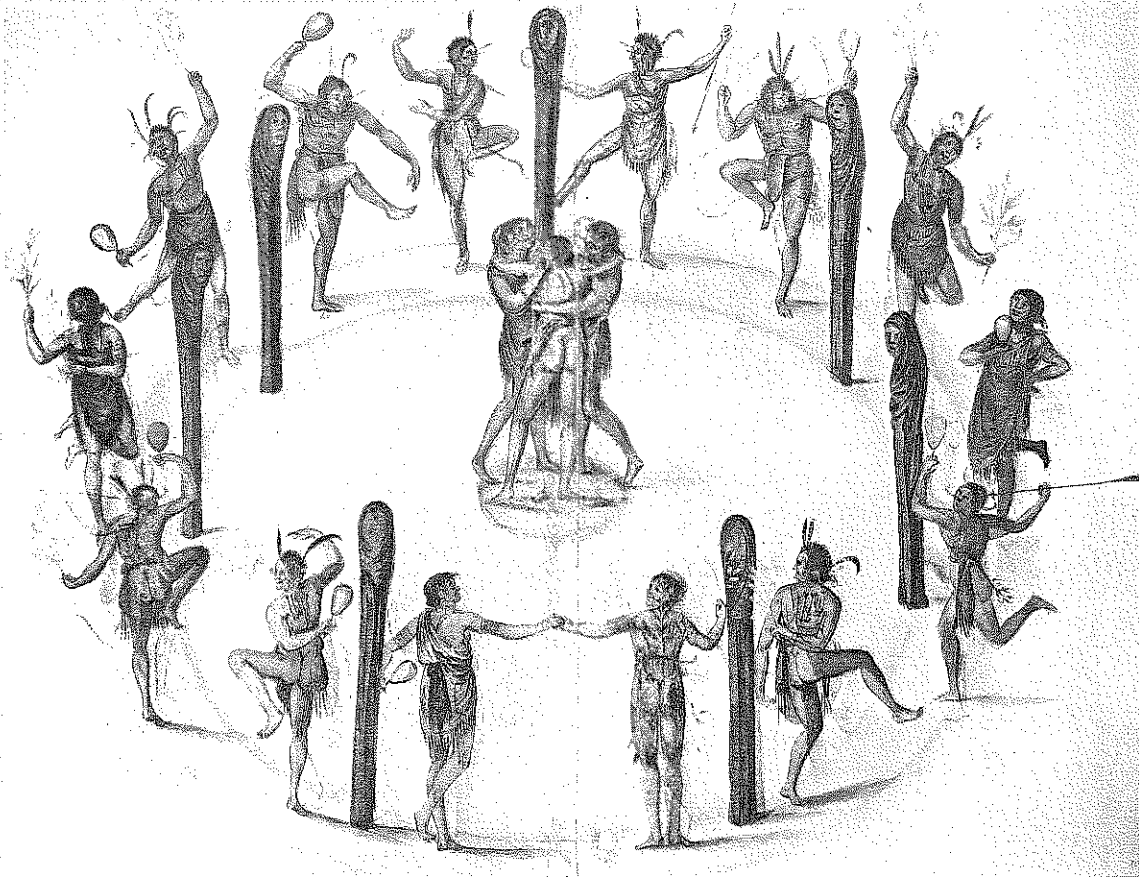
Europeans such as White were struck with the participation of women in the public rituals that they observed. Why was this phenomenon worth depicting so lavishly? In *Indians Dancing around a Circle of Posts* (Figure 1.6, p. 40), also of Algonquian people, women are depicted both in the outer circle alongside men and at the center. The women can be distinguished from the men by their hair,



◆ Figure 1.5 John White, *A Chief Lady of Pomeiooc and Her Daughter*  
© The Trustees of the British Museum/Art Resource, NY.

which is tied back at the nape. They were described as "three of the fayrest Virgins."<sup>22</sup> Scholars have identified this as a corn festival. How else is the centrality of women recognized in this ritual? What do you make of the wide variety of costumes?

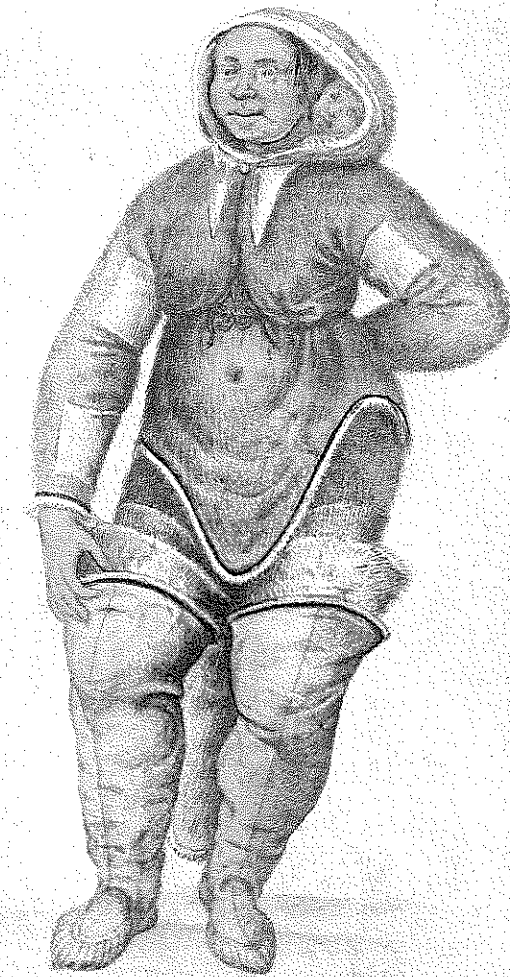
While most of White's paintings focus on the Atlantic Coast Algonquians with whom he met and lived, a small part of his work focused on Aleutian Islanders.



◆ Figure 1.6 John White, *Indians Dancing around a Circle of Posts* (1590)  
The Granger Collection, New York.

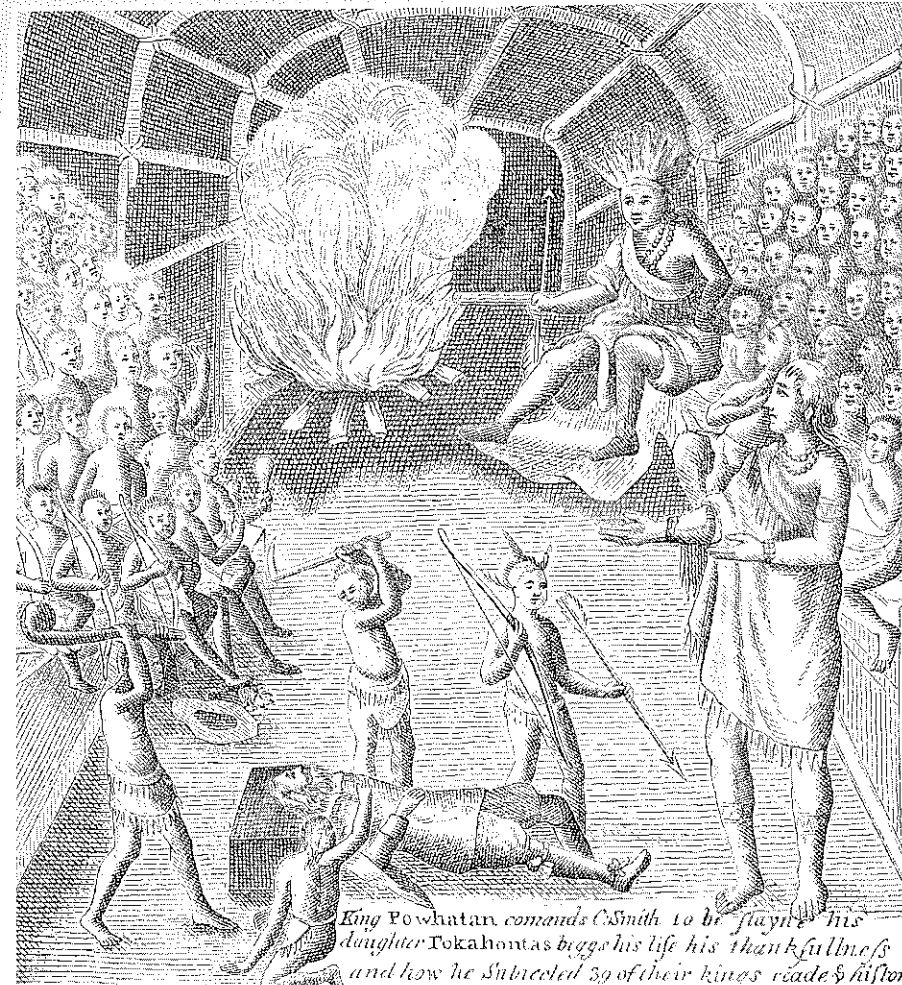
The British explorer Martin Frobisher sailed in search of a Northwest Passage to Asia in the 1570s and landed in what is now Baffin Island, northern Canada, between Greenland and Quebec Province. He brought back two captives with him, one man and one woman. White either sailed with Frobisher or met these Indians in London in 1577. In either case, White's attention to detail is once again evident. Figure 1.7 (p. 41) is that of a woman in a sealskin dress and distinctive high boots. Her face is tattooed, but what is most striking about the image is the baby's face visible inside her hood. Why did White paint yet another image of Indian motherhood? What other similarities, if any, does this woman bear to the women near Roanoke that White painted a decade later?

Pocahontas of the Algonquian-speaking Powhatan people in Virginia is perhaps the most famous Native American woman (see p. 25). Figure 1.8 (p. 42) represents



◆ Figure 1.7 John White, *Eskimo Woman* (1577)  
© The Trustees of the British Museum/Art Resource, NY.

the famous story of how she convinced her father, the powerful chief Powhatan, to spare the life of Captain John Smith. An unidentified illustrator prepared this image for Smith's account of his adventures, published in London in 1612. As Smith recounted it (writing about himself in the third person), "At last they brought him to Meronocomo, where was Powhatan their Emperor. Here more than two hundred of those grim Courtiers stood wondering at him, as he had been a monster; . . . having feasted him after their best barbarous manner they could, a long consultation was held, but the conclusion was, two great stones were brought before Powhatan; then as many as could laid hands on him,



◆ Figure 1.8 *Pocahontas Convinces Her Father, Chief Powhatan, to Spare the Life of Captain John Smith*, from John Smith, *Generall Historie of Virginia* (1612)

Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

dragged him to them; and thereon laid his head, and being ready with their clubs, to beate out his braines, Pocahontas the Kings dearest daughter, when no intreaty could prevaile, got his head in her armes, and laid her owne upon his to save him from death.<sup>23</sup> What is Smith suggesting about Pocahontas and about himself by this story? What other possible interpretations of the events depicted here can you suggest?



◆ Figure 1.9 *Pocahontas* (1616)

Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Other images of Pocahontas come from her brief, celebrated trip to England, where she was presented as Native American royalty and as proof of the promise and success of the Jamestown settlement and of the eventual transplantation of English culture in the New World. Figure 1.9, a 1616 portrait painted shortly before her death, represents her as John Smith later described her: "a gracious lady" with a "very formall and civill . . . English manner."<sup>24</sup> The Virginia Company, which sponsored her trip and presumably commissioned the portrait, spent lavishly on her costume, with its rich lace and braid on her tapestry fabric dress. The hat was no doubt made of American beaver skins. What is the irony of picturing Pocahontas wearing this highly valued New World export? Why might Smith and others of the Virginia Company have sponsored this representation of Pocahontas? How does this portrait compare to that of the then recently deceased English queen, Elizabeth, on page 23?

#### QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. This visual essay features European images of early Native American women and cautions that we must "read" these images carefully in using them to understand indigenous women's lives. What limitations do these images have as historical sources?
2. What commonalities do you find among the different representations here of Native American women? What differences?
3. One important characteristic of Native societies was the sexual division of labor. In what ways do these images depict women's economic participation in their communities?

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