

## **Savages vs Settlers: The semiotic resources present in the fantastic tale *Princess Pocahontas* that illustrate the indigenous princess immersed in the culture of the colonizer**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This work intends to initially study the ancestry of fairy tales, theorizing the oral dimension that a narrative told from generation to generation can reach. Authors such as Charles Perrault, La Fontaine, the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen make up the circle of notorious writers who have given life to the wonderful tales sown among castes for centuries. Along with the narrated story, illustrative art presents itself to the reader as a way of visually materializing a tale, a legend, contributing to the discernment of a diegesis that often embraces a very significant social, cultural and historical perspective. The classic *Princess Pocahontas*, examined in this work, is configured as a fairy tale that addresses the theme of North American colonization in the sixteenth century. From an investigative look at the semiotic resources present in Virginia Watson's illustrated work, this article proposes to explore the way in which the illustrations of luxury examples seek to represent the indigenous princess immersed in the culture of her colonizer.

**Keywords:** Tale, Pocahontas, Illustration, Colonization.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Through the ethical morals present between the lines of children's and youth narratives, especially with regard to classic fables, such as "The Ant and the Grasshopper", "The Donkey and the Snake" and "The Mouse and the Frog", and fairy tales, such as "The Three Little Pigs", "Little Red Riding Hood" and "The Young Shepherd and the Wolf", the stories of frog princes and brave princesses, Intelligent animals and *oracles*, energetic and cunning, designed throughout childhood and youth, they perpetuated materials and legacies that extend from the feeling of belonging and acceptance to lessons on the ethical foundations on which individuality and the collective are based. We irrefutably highlight the essence of collectivity eternalized by the millennial popularization of fairy stories and we subscribe to the statement of Maurice Halbwachs (1990) who says that "the memories of human beings remain collective, being remembered by others, even if they are artifacts that only they have seen and events in which only they have been involved". (HALBWACHS. 1990, p. 11).

As theorized by Bruno Bettelhem (2023),

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Fairy tales are unique, not only as a form of literature, but as works of art that are fully understandable by the child as no other form of art is. As with all great art, the deeper meaning of the fairy tale will be different for each person, and different for the same person at various times in his life. The individual will extract different meanings from the same fairy tale, depending on their interests and needs at the time. Given the opportunity, she will return to the same tale when she is ready to expand the old meanings or replace them with new ones (BETTELHEM, 2023, p. 21).

Regarding Maurice Halbwachs' assertion, we recall the moments of collective reading with classmates during the early school years, in which our inaugural experiences as readers were consolidated. We explored the books obstinately, from top to bottom, starting with the cover, draining through the opening pages until we reached the end, sad for the brevity of the stories, meanwhile quick for the adventure we had just savored. Everything was magical: the frontifs, the sheets, the letters, the figures. The images contributed greatly to the understanding of the narrative, since the delineation of the facial expressions of the characters, the watercolor cut of the physical spaces of the fables, as well as the adornments present in the imagetic configurations of the pages, made the fiction pleasant, desired, playful. An unparalleled attention was paid to the illustrations. As defended by Perry Nodelman (1988), "any picture that has been offered to our attention, especially one found in the context of a picture book, implies that the image it depicts is significantly meaningful, worthy of our consideration"<sup>3</sup> (NODELMAN, 1988, p. 49). And he adds that "picture books express our assumption of the metaphorical relationships between appearances and meaning"<sup>4</sup> (NODELMAN, 1988, p. 49).

In this brief work, we will address, from the choice of a fairy tale, more specifically the work "Pocahontas", by Virginia Watson, the semiotic elements present in the illustrated deluxe copy printed by the publisher *Wish* in 2021. For the purposes of analysis, different illustrations by different authors will be considered, but with a common link: the representation of the indigenous princess immersed in the culture of the colonizer. Initially, I will make a synthetic theoretical dive into the world of fairy tales and illustrative artistic productions to, later, analyze the illustrations I propose.

## **FANTASTIC TALES AND THEIR ILLUSTRATIONS: A SECULAR INTERTWINING**

Covering elements such as heroes, villains, princesses, aggressors, fantastic animals, supernatural creatures, the wonderful tales constitute narratives aimed at children that inflate the imagination of these young readers and are propagated among castes for generations. The popular imagination denotes fairy tales as simple-minded productions and exclusive children's entertainment, however the fantastic collections embrace semantic resources loaded with moral precepts that prepare and support the critical and ethical thinking of children for the future. Lectures that involve deontological discourses, such as

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<sup>3</sup> Our translation: [Any image that has been offered to our attention, especially one found in the context of a picture book, implies that the image it depicts is significantly full, worthy of our consideration.]

<sup>4</sup> [Picture books express our assumption of the metaphorical relations between appearances and meanings.]



"take responsibility for your actions", "guide yourself through the wisdom of your masters", "reach out to your neighbor and help him", are repeatedly present between the lines of these timeless magical fictions. In addition to contemplating the morality present in stories, Bettelhem (2023) clarifies that fairy tales propose something that overlaps "the correct ways of behaving in this world" (BETTELHEM, 2023, p. 36): the individual will find his answers to his intimate wars "through the contemplation of what history seems to suggest about himself and his conflicts" (BETTELHEM, 2023, p. 36).

The characters and situations of fairy tales also personify and illustrate intimate conflicts, but they always subtly suggest how these conflicts can be resolved and what are the next steps to be taken towards a higher humanity. The fairy tale is presented in a simple, unpretentious way; No request is made to the listener. [...] Far from making requests, the fairy tale reassures, gives hope for the future and offers the promise of a happy ending. For this reason, Lewis Carroll called it a "gift of love" (BETTELHEM, 2023, p. 37-38).

Ana Lúcia Merege, in her book "Fairy Tales: Origins, History and Permanence in the Modern World" (2010), theorizes that fairy tales date back millennia, when the first civilizations began to organize themselves. In all of them, congruent with the author, the process of using language to exchange information, explain natural phenomena, give meaning to the world and to life itself through storytelling, was of paramount importance. Civilizations developed and tales survived the paths of time thanks to oral tradition, until their first records were consolidated. Dating from 1550, the precursor work of the fantastic genre is entitled "Piacevoli Notti", by the Italian Renaissance writer Giovanni Francesco Staparoli, who brought together everyday stories and folk tales such as the famous "Puss in Boots". According to Maria Tereza Amodeo Barbosa (1991), the word *story* It originates from Latin, and its meaning refers to two dimensions: on the one hand, orality and, on the other, fictionality. It is, according to him, a report that has no commitment to reality, using the marvelous with the function of entertaining and enabling the verbalization of human difficulties. Barbosa (1991) and Maria Tatar (2004) elucidate that fairy tales, until the seventeenth century, were not works intended exclusively for children, but rather stories narrated to anyone, of any age, and were related to a narrative tradition that flowed especially through the speech of peasant women, who reproduced stories taken from folklore, in which they expressed their nonconformity with feudal values. Throughout the Middle Ages, fantastic tales were consolidated by orality and, from the seventeenth century onwards, retold in writings by great literati such as Charles Perrault, La Fontaine, the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen.

We clarify that the authors of the wonderful tales, through fiction, encompassing a diegesis crowned by illustrations, sought to materialize, in their repertoires, the obstacles experienced by individuals and based themselves on meritorious events at the time in order to weave and build their chimerical narratives. Themes absorbed from secular episodes, such as witch hunts, exploitation of workers, plague infestations, romances between nobles and slaves, North American colonization,



machismo, poverty and social exclusion, among others, were configured as key pieces for the creation of grandiose fairy tales that have become notorious and prestigious to this day.

The illustrations bring the narratives to life. As clarified by Nodelman, "pictures can change the narrative thrust of words".<sup>5</sup> Freitas and Zimmermann (2007) externalize that illustrations are artistic representations that expand, question, construct, replace, and even add information to a text. In her essay on fantastic narratives, Merege (2019) points out that works that transcend reality have reached the present day through successive richly illustrated editions. Memorable tales, such as "The Little Thumb" (1697), by Charles Perrot, and "Hansel and Gretel" (1812), by Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, had, in the mid-nineteenth century, illustrations by the great French painter, draughtsman and illustrator, Gustave Doré. Also according to the researcher, the projection of short stories grew a lot from the twentieth century onwards with the rise of cinema and other masses responsible for the visual technical reproducibility of fantastic literature, such as comics and television, which often appropriate short stories to build their media productions full of three-dimensional animations, which arise from a crucial initial technical work: the creation of illustrations.

## **THE CLASSIC "POCAHONTAS"**

Decorated as one of the main classics of the Disney Pictures production company<sup>6</sup>, the film adaptation of the wonderful tale "Pocahontas", from 1995, was one of the few animated feature films that was concerned with externalizing a legitimate history of the ancestral North American indigenous peoples. The feature consists of splendid scenes composed of indisputable technical excellence. The panorama under shades of a watercolor and the composition of the scenery through geometric shapes, used mainly to build the forests of Virginia (the cardinal space of the work), consolidate the public's fascination with the visual aesthetics of the production.

The cinematographic work, although a favorite of the romantic intertwining between the indigenous woman and her colonizer, is based on the relationship of domination of white Europeans over Anglo-Saxon indigenous peoples, baptized as "savages" by the English. Based on Barbosa's (1991) critique, "Pocahontas" is configured as a fantastic tale that has, as a backdrop, a theme focused on the North American political and social issues of the seventeenth century: the great navigations, the English occupation and the carnage of the natives. Even with the lack of supernatural elements and/or characters, the exegesis, moreover, alluding to the clash between good (indigenous) and evil (settlers), solidifies the essence of a wonderful tale: it is characterized as a prose preached and propagated by generations and,

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<sup>5</sup> NODELMAN, 1988, p. 196. [Illustrations may alter the narrative impulse of words]

<sup>6</sup>Here the word Disney refers to The Walt Disney Company. It started in 1923 and is currently the largest animation studio in the world. He is famous for the creation of the character Mickey Mouse in 1928.



moreover, echoes an eighteenth-century social context. It is worth noting that the first written production about the famous indigenous heroine princess, entitled "Princess Pocahontas", was written by Virginia Watson, in 1916, based on diaries and historical documents from the American colonial era. Orality, likewise, contributed artistically and meticulously to the fictionality of the novel in the light of its publication in the early twentieth century.

Backed by a true story, the fairy tale "Pocahontas" is structured on the story of the indigenous Matoaka (nicknamed Pocahontas), daughter of the indigenous chief Powhatan, born in mid-1595 in a region known by the indigenous people as *Tsenacommacah*<sup>7</sup>, which was home to all the Aboriginal Native communities of the coastal region of the current state of Virginia, in the southeastern region of the United States.

Pocahontas was born near the end of the sixteenth century as the daughter of Chief Powhatan. It was she, known as Matoaka by her clan, who interceded on behalf of John Smith in 1608 and then persuaded her father to bring food to the starving settlers of Jamestown. Everyone knows the plot of how the Indian princess saved Captain John Smith's life, but that's not the full story. (WISH, 2021, p. 20).

The time and space of the narrative, told from father to son for generations, takes place in a very categorical way: the struggle for indigenous lands in the north of the Americas in a period of war between savages and invaders in the early seventeenth century.

The real and imagined stories involving the Indians and the wars between them and the colonizers made the red man the devil incarnate himself, without attributing to him any quality other than courage. But now, there is a new aura of understanding. We are discovering that often the Indian was wronged and the white man was the cause of injustice. (WATSON, 2021, p. 12).

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<sup>7</sup> Name given by the Powhatan people to their homeland. It corresponds to the area that encompasses all of Tidewater Virginia and parts of the eastern shore.

Figure 1 - Illustration of the indigenous Matoaka (Pocahontas) baptized, renamed, catechized and naturalized English, Simon van de Passe, 1616.



Source: Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery<sup>8</sup>.

The period in which the first settlements of the English population in North America took place - the first half of the seventeenth century - corresponds to the first period of rule of the Stuart dynasty on the English throne (1603 - 1648), marked by political conflicts between the absolutist tendencies of the Stuarts and Parliament, which wanted to maintain and expand its prerogatives contrary to monarch totalitarianism. The economic process at the time was configured as a course of expulsion of workers from the English countryside towards the new urban centers, which were unable to absorb the abundant labor force that arrived from the interior. Such a rural exodus contributed not only to the spread of poverty and social tensions between kings, nobles and peasants, but also to a framework of religious intolerance that stretched the segregation of local communities. It is in this context that a migration movement from England towards North America begins through large maritime expeditions. The invasion of American lands was also ordered and financed by the British government, which was focused on policies of territorial domination. Jamestown (Virginia, USA), considered the first British settlement on American lands, was occupied by John Smith (1580-1631), an expeditionary and captain in the British navy.

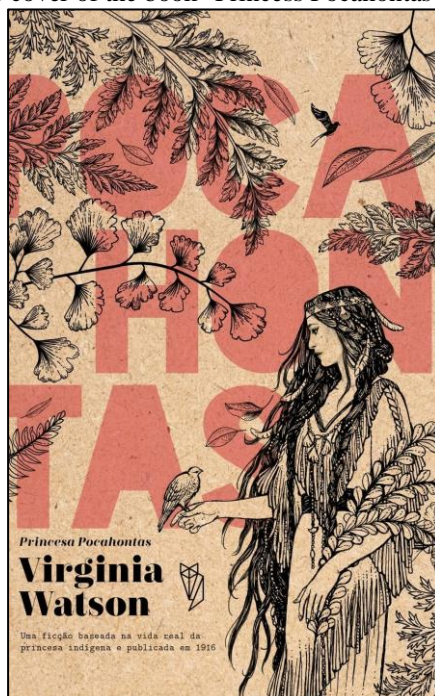
## **THE BOOK "PRINCESS POCAHONTAS" FROM A SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE**

With 20 (twenty) chapters and extra prefaces, including a collection of illustrations - by different authors - the work under study takes the homonymous title to that of the indigenous princess Pocahontas. Translated by Carolina Caires Coelho, "Princess Pocahontas" (2021), initially written and published in 1916, by Virginia Watson, narrates the story of the savage indigenous daughter of Chief Powhatan

<sup>8</sup> Available at: <<https://npg.si.edu/learn/classroom-resource/pocahontas-c1595%E2%80%93931617>>. Accessed on March 26, 2022.

throughout the 320 pages of the second edition of the issue. Suitable for all ages, the book has a hard cover in Kraft paper<sup>9</sup>, the core of which is made up of pollen paper *Soft*, in the 15.5x23 cm format.

Figure 2 - Illustrative cover of the book "Princess Pocahontas", by Virginia Watson.



Source: Wish Publishing House

The publisher's interest in bringing a respectable and luxurious edition of the story of the indigenous princess is already beginning to manifest itself in the elaboration of the cover. Nodelman's (1988) proposition about the expectations of the reading public regarding the appearance of a book seems to support the choice of a hardcover by the publisher:

We expect more distinctive literature from hardcover books with texture, one-color covers and more conventionally popular material from books with luridly colored plastic coatings. We tend to think differently about paper-covered books and ones with hard covers, and as a result we respond differently to the same story in different formats; what might seem forbidding and respectable in hardcover often seems disposable and unthreatening in soft<sup>10</sup>. (NODELMAN, 1988, p. 44)

The cover of the copy is composed of a referential figurative illustration, since the engraving describes the title of the work and vice versa. In it, the illustrator was concerned with reproducing the indigenous Pocahontas wrapped in garments and adornments that refer to the North American aboriginal

<sup>9</sup> Paper manufactured by mixing several types of cellulose fibers found in softwood pulp. It is a resistant, versatile material, and can be used in the manufacture of boxes (cardboard), envelopes, bags, bread bags, among others.

<sup>10</sup> Our translation: [We expect a more distinctive literature of textured hardcover books, one-color covers, and more conventionally popular material than books with brightly colored plastic coatings. We tend to think differently about paper books and hardcover books, and as a result, we respond differently to the same book in different formats; What may seem prohibitive and respectable in hardcover often seems disposable and not at all threatening in softcover.]

culture: gathered blankets, bird feathers that make up earrings and headdresses, claws and animal beaks hanging like necklaces. The savage woman who appears on the cover is surrounded by paintings of birds, plants and leaves: figurative resources that suggest the setting (forest) and characterization of the indigenous world, in a bucolic spirit that blows us a character associated with something good. The monoscenic figure on the cover was outlined by illustrator Janaina Medeiros.

Reaffirming the heavyweight edition proposed by the publisher, the copy consists of paper pages under a thicker, more intimate and sensorially unique texture. "More roughly textured paper seems to invite our touch and in that way supports an atmosphere of involvement and intimacy"<sup>11</sup>. (NODELMAN, 1988, p. 48).

Figure 3 - The baptism of Pocahontas, art by Charles Burt, based on John G. Chapman (1912)



Source: Wish Publishing House

The illustration above validates the relationship of domination and submission between invaders and indigenous people. In black and white, from a monoscenic perspective, the illustration, focusing on the princess kneeling at the feet of the English ecclesiastic, perpetuates the figure of a savage "domesticated" by European Christianity. The facial and body expression of the indigenous woman, with her eyes closed, with her hands close to her chest, wearing a white outfit, suggest reverence for God and submission to the colonizer's religion. The illustration depicts a savage who does not fight but accepts Christian domination.

<sup>11</sup> [A paper with a thicker texture seems to invite us to touch and thus creates an atmosphere of involvement and intimacy.]



The article by Sarah J. Stebbins (2010), entitled "Beyond John Smith's Diaries", available in the afterword of the book "Princess Pocahontas" (2021), briefly explains, when dealing with Chapman's illustration (1912), the relationship of submission to which the princess was subjected.

Pocahontas converted to Christianity and was renamed Rebecca. In April 1914, she and John Rolfe were married in Jamestown. Whether she really wanted to convert is questionable, as she had little choice. She was a prisoner who wanted to represent her people in the best possible way and protect them. (STEBBINS, 1985, p. 306-307)

The imagetic balance of the illustration is supported by the propositions of Rudolf Arnheim (1980) in his work "Art and visual perception". According to the German behaviorist psychologist, based on an investigation carried out by Mercedes Gaffron, the observer of an illustrative work "subjectively identifies with the left and anything that appears there assumes the greatest importance". (ARNHEIM, 1980, p. 26).

When you compare photographs with your mirror images, a foreground object in an asymmetrical scene appears closer on the left side than if it were on the right. And when the curtain rises in the theater, the tendency of the audience is to look at their left side first and identify with the characters that appear on that side. For this reason, according to Alexandre Dean, among the so-called scenic areas, the left side (from the point of view of the audience) is considered the strongest. In a group of actors, the one furthest from the left dominates the scene. The audience identifies with him and, from this position, sees others as opponents. (ARNHEIM, 1980, p. 26)

Notice Princess Pocahontas illustrated in figure 3 (three). The illustrator Charles Bunt wanted to draw the viewer's attention to the most important act of his art: the baptism of the indigenous woman, next to the "most central, most important and most emphasized" (ARNHEIM, 1980, p. 26) side of the canvas. We emphasize that the people positioned on the right side of the illustration seem more noticeable, under a greater imagetic weight. This statement is supported by Arnheim when he says that "the view on the right side must be more articulated" (ARNHEIM, 1980, p. 26), heavy, eye-catching, in order to have a balance between the two spaces of the figure. Right below, figure 4 (four), moreover, will have the same imagetic balance discussed by the theorist of art and cinema.

Figure 4 - The wedding of Pocahontas and John Rolfe, art by Geo Spohni (1867)



Source: Wish Publishing House

The marriage of Pocahontas and John Rolfe, to which Stebbins (2010) refers, is illustrated by Geo Spohni (1867). In a pose of placidity, the indigenous woman Matoaka, in a sanctified portrait, is characterized as a pure, beatified woman: the illustration of the savage woman has traces of a representation of a canonized woman. It is interesting to highlight the similarity that the figure of the indigenous woman of Geo Spohni (1867) has with the representative images of Our Lady of Fatima<sup>12</sup>. The illustration also characterizes the characters by their clothing: the colonists are delineated with pieces of clothing and objects that refer to the European civilization of the seventeenth century: shoes, long dresses supported by a kind of corset, capes, doublets, stockings, breeches, spears, armor, firearms, etc.; and the North American savages are illustrated with their adornments—necklaces, feathers, blankets. The relationship of submission is also remarkable: the Englishman is positioned more in front of the female figure of the native, sharpening the millennial panorama of power between men and women, settlers and indigenous people. Furthermore, although portrayed in a purified way, Pocahontas wears clothes from the culture of her colonizers, reaffirming her submission to the world of John Rolfe. Its purification, then, excludes it from all its ancestral indigenous culture. Pocahontas, now, is Rebecca: a virgin woman of her ancestry, but invaded by European precepts.

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<sup>12</sup> Our Lady of the Rosary of Fatima, more commonly known as Our Lady of Fatima, is one of the invocations attributed to the Virgin Mary and which had its origin in the apparitions received by three shepherd children in the place of Cova da Iria, in Fatima, Portugal.

Figure 5 - Pocahontas presents herself. A popular history of the United States, Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection (1876)



Source: Wish Publishing House

In figure 5 (five), the illustrator - unidentified - was concerned with portraying, in black and white, the submission of the indigenous woman to the English nobles. One can notice the image of Pocahontas on the left, bent over, in a position that not only shows respect, but also submission to the aristocracy. She is once again portrayed with clothes and elements that refer to her wild origin. An indigenous headdress can be identified on her head, as well as two bracelets that suggest an adornment made with indigenous material - very different from the clothes of the settlers. The clothing that covers Pocahontas' body contrasts with the elegant and extravagant attire of the illustrated aristocrat in front of her, seated next to a noble lord. Rufus - a piece of great importance from the English Renaissance era - can be seen drawn on the necks of the European characters that make up the scene. In addition, the image of Pocahontas bowing towards a male aristocrat, and the figure of the noble woman sitting next to him, suggests the relationship of submission to which the female sex is and has always been enslaved. It is the portrait of the power of the English nobility under the domination of men.

Living up to Arnheim's (1980) concepts, in an action of imagetic balance, Pocahontas was illustrated on the left, in a movement by the illustrator to draw the attention of the reader-observer; and the aristocrat - whom she reveres - is portrayed, in black, more in the center, towards the right of the image, under a greater imagetic weight, given by the color and positioning of the character.

Figure 6 - Pocahontas and John Rolfe (year and author not identified)



Source: Wish Publishing House

By an unidentified author, the black and white illustration that makes up figure 6 (six) shows Pocahontas next to her husband, John Rolfe, wearing an elegant dress loose over a petticoat with a narrower sleeve - a reference to the English women's fashion of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Now civilized, it is illustrated with a feather on her head, referring the reader to the character's indigenous ancestry. Beatified, in a face of placidity and complacency, Pocahontas is illustrated, once again, on the left side of the canvas, contrasting the imagetic weight with the illustration of the character John Rolfe on the right of the image - the darker shade of the character's clothing supports the balance of the illustration. John Rolfe is drawn with Caucasian European features - thin face and nose, white skin tone and hair with curls at the ends. His exuberant clothing also gives him membership in an English aristocracy.

## CONCLUSION

Pocahontas has fixed herself in the children's imagination with numerous representations in physical books and e-books - in a more contemporary context - of the world of the indigenous princess. No less important, the 1995 and 1998 films, by the Walt Disney production company, also contributed to the tale being transposed from writing to the cinema screens as a way to materialize and perpetuate the story of the native Matoaka for future generations. The picture books that tell the story of the princess



commonly bring illustrative representations of the relations between the North American savages and the European settlers, however there are few that translate the submission of Pocahontas to the culture of her colonizer. Perhaps because it has become famous among children, the plot of the tale, as well as the illustrations that sharpen the narrative, is usually presented in a way that is not very inviting to the exploration of the social and historical context in which the plot is inserted. However, as discussed in the course of this work, the story of Princess Pocahontas is attached to the context of exploration to which the North American Indians were subjected during the period of the great navigations. In the century of the flourishing of maritime expeditions, the Americas were invaded, assaulted and devastated. And concerned with portraying the faithful story of Pocahontas, the publisher Wish brought to the public a luxury work with a collection of illustrations that expose the clash between indigenous and Europeans in a much more elucidative way, using illustrative engravings so that the reader could have a more faithful portrait of the domination and servitude of the *savage* to the dogmas of the English nobility. The illustration techniques highlighted in this article reaffirm that the story of the native Matoaka goes far beyond the simplistic diegesis of the love intertwining of an indigenous woman with a colonizer.



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