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How European Folk Stories Have Misrepresented Indigenous Women

Jacqueline S. Marotto
Gettysburg College

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How European Folk Stories Have Misrepresented Indigenous Women

Abstract

An examination of Rayna Green's "The Pocahontas Perplex" in reflection of course material about the role of indigenous women in North America.

Keywords

Native American women, misinterpretation, folk stories, indigenous people, ethnicity, Rayna Green, The Pocahontas Perplex

Disciplines

Cultural History | English Language and Literature | Ethnic Studies | European Languages and Societies | Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Folklore | Gender and Sexuality | Indigenous Studies | Inequality and Stratification | International and Area Studies | Multicultural Psychology | Race and Ethnicity | Rural Sociology | Sociology | Women's History

Comments

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Jackie Marotto

Marotto 1

Professor Sellers

WGS 214

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How European Folk Stories Have Misrepresented Indigenous Women

In her essay “The Pocahontas Perplex,” Rayna Green identifies some of the tropes and stereotypes about Indigenous women present in American culture that many of us have not given a second thought to, as we have been familiar with them our entire lives. Green opens her discussion by explaining that upon European contact, Native women were plugged into older European folklore stories as a way for the settlers to present supposed truths about the native peoples of the Americas. Women were really the ones who suffered from these blanket assumptions, however, and Green identifies the three categories Europeans assigned Native women to as: the Queen, the Princess, and the Squaw, each of whom, although slightly different, are all defined based on their relationships with white men. Green concludes with a call for “the Native woman...to be defined as Indian, in Indian terms” rather than by negative European ideas (Green 210). Green asserts that the unfavorable depictions and descriptions of Native women originated from the Europeans’ old folk tales, and that they incorrectly portray these native women and their people, stealing their autonomy and ability to define themselves separately from their relationships with European men. This need to control women by fitting them into specific, degrading categories comes from the Western notions of male dominance in the heteronormative patriarchy as supported by monotheistic religious traditions as well as the need to Christianize and educate “heathens.”

While Green explains that the Europeans assigned Native women specific categories of what “type” of woman there were, she also clarifies that these tropes assigned to women had been part of European stories since at least 1300, and so putting Indigenous women into these

molds seemed completely rational, as they were already familiar with these ideas. The Europeans used the Natives as a way for them to better understand this new territory they encountered. As Green explains, “The misnamed Indian was the native dweller who fit conventionally into the various traditional folkloric, philosophical and literary patterns characteristic of European thought at the time. Europeans easily adopted the Indian as the iconographic representative of the Americas” (Green 205). This shows how the Europeans did not give any consideration to the customs or traditions of the Indigenous peoples so that they could better understand their culture as a way of getting to know this new land around them – they simply condensed Indigenous ways of life into stories that they could understand.

Fast forward to 1575, when Native women begin filling these stereotypes as the Queen, the Princess, and the Squaw. The three are distinctly separate, yet all manage to undermine the power and spirituality of Indigenous women as they experienced in their own communities a freedom that the Europeans could not understand and therefore did not value. The Queen or “Mother-Goddess figure” was somewhat militant, in addition to being “powerful, [and] nurturing but dangerous” (Green 205). Her daughter, the Princess, has adapted more to American ways of life and is consequently lighter in skin tone (perhaps suggested a more learned and educated disposition, as the Europeans identified lighter skin with a higher capacity for intelligence), thinner, dressed more in European fashion, and usually carries some sort of weapon as well as something distinctly American, such as a flag. This is what Green identifies as the “Pocahontas perplex,” an amalgamation of American and European ideas symbolized with something, in this case a woman, from the New World. Green believes that “the Pocahontas perplex emerged as a controlling metaphor in the American experience,” which indeed explains the use of that woman’s image in advertising of a variety of products, and also why our culture still has an

inexplicable fascination with her today, as shown by popular culture references like the Disney film *Pocahontas* (Green 205). Perhaps this entrancement with her character is advanced by the fact that, as a proper Princess, according to the European trope, she left her people for the man she loved, became a Christian, and consequently developed into a more “civilized” individual. According to Green, “To be ‘good,’ she [the Indian Princess] must defy her own people, exile herself from them, become white, and perhaps suffer death” (Green 206). Pocahontas endured all of these tasks, whether of her own accord or not, and that perhaps explains why we still admire her to this day – she became one of us.

The last trope that Green identifies is that of the Squaw, the “dark side” of the Queen who is more like an Indian man in her characteristics than the Queen or Princess. She is usually depicted as darker, fat, drunken, and somewhat loose with her sexual liberties, as she usually has multiple children, something uncommon in Indigenous societies, where a special emphasis was placed on raising one child at a time so they could receive all the attention they deserved to grow up into a happy and contributing member of the community. The Squaw represents all of the incorrect and racist misperceptions of Indigenous society, as seen by the Europeans. Although she disapproves of all of the tropes, Green especially laments the position of the Squaw, a word which, as we know from Sally Roesch Wagner’s work *Sisters In Spirit*, has been taken out of use because of its extremely derogatory connotations. Wagner quotes an 1890 newspaper article that urges the discontinuation of the term, and herself declares that “Within our children’s lifetime, we will probably see this offensive word eliminated from public use” (Wagner 27). Indeed, the fact that Green uses the term at all to describe the stereotype accorded to Native women serves to illustrate the negative associations the word carries, and the fact that both of these works were

published in 2001 shows the progression society is making towards eliminating discriminatory words from regular language.

In continuation of her extra sympathy for the image of the Squaw, Green deplores the fact that, while “The Indian woman is between a rock and a hard place” by not being able to control her own image or perception, the Squaw especially has even less room to define herself, as she in particular is defined by her interactions and/or relationships with white men, which are seen as improper for her, even though they are perfectly acceptable for the Christianized, educated Princess (Green 210).

While the Europeans defined Indigenous women in terms of their relations with men, that is not how Native societies determined the status of a woman at all. In Paula Gunn Allen’s *The Sacred Hoop*, she explains how Europeans studying Native societies incorrectly placed their own western ideas about the tradition of marriage onto the nations, which in fact did not share the same ideas about that practice. For example, she cites one anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski, who imposes western ideas of the nuclear family onto Indigenous households, which were in reality organized according to female blood relationships, rather than marriage ties. This focus on spiritual ties to family members contrasts greatly with what Malinowski was familiar with, and yet he still attempted to consolidate what he saw into western ideas. Gunn Allen explains that Malinowski “perceive[d] native households from the viewpoint of the nuclear family” (Gunn Allen 249). She continues to explain that these incorrect conclusions “can be explained only by the distorting function of cultural bias,” the very same that caused the Europeans to assign Native women to the stereotypes they were already familiar with, without taking their individual personalities or rights as humans into account (Gunn Allen 250).

The introductions of female stereotypes contrast with the fact that Indigenous societies were egalitarian before European contact, as well as free of violence against or rape of women. The patriarchy and Christianity, which were thrust upon the Indigenous peoples through the relocation of their children into boarding schools, brainwashed the children into assuming western cultural ideas that promoted such acts. This encouraged them to erase their knowledge of their native customs and traditions, which, as described in *Two-Spirit*, led to a lack of intergenerational understanding, as children would often return home and not be able to communicate with their people.

Rayna Green in her essay “The Pocahontas Perplex” puts a name to the stereotypes that Europeans, for their own purposes of colonization fit Indigenous women into, those being the Queen, the Princess, and the Squaw. Although each trope has its own identity and connotations, all three women are primarily defined by their relationships with white European men. This consequently limits the way others perceive them and makes it more difficult for them to break free and reclaim their identity. These stereotypes limit all Indigenous women in some way, as it becomes difficult for them, in the face of patriarchy as justified by Christianity, to escape these preconceived notions that they actually fit into one of these demeaning groups.

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