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WRITING "POCAHONTAS AT THE MASQUE"

KAREN ROBERTSON, VASSAR COLLEGE

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When visiting the Jamestown settlement, I saw a young boy of about eight, fair haired and blue eyed, who with his parents was looking at the statue of Pocahontas, a pleasant bronze of a girl that marks the entrance into the museum. The boy said, "Dirty Indian" and spat at the statue. The parents said nothing in reprimand or comment. I was startled by the suddenness of his hostility as well as by their silence. That moment crystallized a long curiosity I had had about the interactions between the earliest English settlers, the native inhabitants, and the formation of our present codes. My decision to write about Pocahontas was formed after several years of teaching both Renaissance drama and "Introduction to Women's Studies," a course which emphasizes a recognition of the grids of race and class that intertwine in the construction of gender. To examine the construction of race in the early seventeenth century, I decided to try to reconstruct the perspective of Pocahontas, an outsider, albeit a highly privileged one, who actually saw English society herself.

Traditional lore about Pocahontas centers on her rescue of an English colonist, John Smith, when he was about to be killed by her father's warriors. This is often represented as a romance narrative, and it is frequently erroneously assumed that at her subsequent marriage to an Englishman, she married John Smith, not John Rolfe. She visited England, as a demonstration of Virginia Company success, and died at Gravesend on her return to America. The core of this story can be found in three major sources: John Rolfe's letter justifying his marriage to an Indian woman, Ralph Hamor's description of her kidnapping and conversion (1615), and most extensively in John Smith's *A True Relation* (1608), and his much later *Generall Historie of Virginia* (1624). English observers in London, John Chamberlain, and Samuel Purchas, a popularizer of narratives of voyage and colonization, also describe her briefly. The curious fact, recorded in John Chamberlain's letter to Dudley Carleton, that Pocahontas on her visit to England had attended a masque at court before returning to Virginia offered me an intriguing conjunction of a native American woman in the audience of a dramatic performance.

Here are some of the problems I found in considering that odd conjunction. First I had to remove the accretions of romance that have encrusted the story. Then I had to evaluate the narratives written by Englishmen for evidence of their attitudes toward women and American Indians. While I could not recover direct evidence of Pocahontas's reaction to the English, I found textual and visual moments that suggest the challenge that she made to European discursive systems. In what I would call a process of feminist archaeology (Deborah Rubin's term), I moved from more traditional activities of literary history—analysis of Ben Jonson's masque and colonial narratives—to the feminist application of the perspective of gender to the historical study of literacy—a task that

often requires a shifted perspective on social history—to historical ethnography, costume history, the history of engraving, and the legal and literary construction of race.

The performance Pocahontas seems to have seen was Ben Jonson's masque, *A Vision of Delight*, in which the newly created Duke of Buckingham danced before his king. The masque is an exemplary text in the construction of monarchical power and openly asserts the project of global imperial hegemony. My participation in a seminar of the Shakespeare Association of America devised by Margaret Ferguson and Ann Jones allowed me to begin to consider Pocahontas as witness to a masque that celebrated, in passing, the conquest of her country. The seminar topic, "Women and Literacy," shaped my first discoveries. After considering David Cressy and Margaret Spufford's work on literacy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, I found it unlikely that the colonists attempted to teach her to read, let alone write. (The two were separate skills in the period.) Although the leaders of the settlement in Jamestown, after kidnapping her in 1613, endeavored to transform her into an English gentlewoman, that training involved change of dress, baptism, and performance of religious rituals, not participation in written culture. My own disciplinary interest in verbal texts was frustrated when I could find no record of her direct comment on these procedures.

In trying to reconstruct her perspective, I turned to the writings by three English colonists, material that has begun to be examined by critics interested in the construction of colonialist discourse. Peter Hulme's careful reading of John Rolfe's letter justifying his marriage considers Rolfe's agitated denial of any carnal desire for Pocahontas as evidence for Rolfe's anxiety over miscegenation. Despite Hulme's brilliant exegesis of the religious significance of the baptism of Pocahontas as Rebecca, a woman who give birth to two sons, the red one, Esau, who sells his birthright to his white brother, I did not find race as clearly defined a category as Hulme's analysis suggests. Examination of material on the legal construction of racial categories in Virginia and the establishment of chattel slavery reveals that discourses of race were more fluid at the beginning of the seventeenth century than they were to become. Native Americans, in particular, remained a category somewhat apart, as a black/white binarism of race developed. Descriptions of native Americans suggest that racial definitions, particularly a focus on skin color, were less fixed than they were to become. For example, Hakluyt describes Indians as "of the colour of an Olive," while Smith says they were "of a colour browne when they are of any age, but they are borne white" (*Generall Historie*, p. 114). I found that the repeated insistence on the class standing of Pocahontas as a princess and daughter of a great emperor seemed to mute or preempt considerations of race. The colonists' attentive descriptions of native American dress suggest that once her clothes were changed, racial difference became less recognizable to Europeans.

In trying to uncover Pocahontas's perspectives on the English, I turned to an historical ethnography of the Powhantans by Helen Rowntree. Though I was not able to construct a unified narrative by Pocahontas's assessment of the English, I was able to recover fragments of moments when her eyes or gestures were sufficiently outside the conventional gestures of Englishwomen for writers to notice and record them. Such moments allowed a process of anthropological reconstruction. For example, when she was sent to parlay for two Powhatans who had been taken captive, she did not look at them. The moment opens access to the practices of a culture of honor and shame in which

captives have been dishonored; her refusal to look at them signals her recognition of their shame.

The episode for which Pocahontas is famous is her rescue of John Smith from execution by her father. That story, which is the grounds for later romance narratives as well as the common mistaken belief that she was married to John Smith, contains material that suggests agency on her part. The story of her sudden gesture to save the Englishman suggests not simply a look, but the ability to act and intervene, to exercise power in the world. Unfortunately, there are major controversies over Smith's veracity, particularly over this story of rescue which he did not tell until seven years after her death in 1617. In reading Smith, I found an intrusion of English occurrences into his descriptions of Virginia. Smith had returned to England in 1609, but failed to receive the court patronage and reward he believed he deserved. In Smith's *General Historie of Virginia*, I found that images of James I seemed to invade the imagination and consciousness of his subject as he described what happened to him in Virginia. Smith's exclusion from the English court is marked by his insistence on his own privileged position at the court of Powhatan and his witnessing of a dance performed by Indian maidens led by Pocahontas that he calls a "Virginia masque."

These substitutions fascinated me. While Smith was engaged in a rhetorical struggle with his monarch, placing himself in the regal position of king at a masque, he simultaneously obscured descriptions of Pocahontas. Frustratingly Samuel Purchas, who met Pocahontas in London on her visit to his patron, shifts from description of her to description of his patron, as if pulled by the inexorable magnet of class from contemplation of racial and cultural difference. Purchas like Smith cannot get his mind off his betters.

The two primary documents that reveal the challenge that Pocahontas made to European discursive systems are the portrait of her by Simon Van de Passe, a Dutch engraver, and the story of her reprimand of John Smith in an inn in Brentford. The portrait attempts to present formal evidence of her conversion to Christianity through the modesty of her dress and the verbal frame around her. Yet the portrait itself depicts a struggle in which her difference produces a figure that seems more masculine than feminine within the codes prevalent in English portraits at the time. Her wearing of a man's hat, a fashion popular in Jacobean London, seems to mark the troubled intersection of race and gender and the difficulty the Dutch painter had in representing her bone structure, eyes, and skin color. The incident at Brentford when John Smith visited her after she had been in England some months offers the most extensive description of her judgment of the English. Pocahontas had believed that Smith was dead until she arrived in England. When he finally visited her, she used silence to force him to hear her judgment of his behavior. By refusing to speak to him and by turning away, she compels Smith's attention. The silence, like her aversion of her eyes from the captives, signals a moment when an alternative system of judgment has entered the English text. Surprisingly, Smith was so struck by her silence that he actually recorded her subsequent reprimand of him for ingratitude. While the text may serve to ventriloquize Smith's own disappointment at his lack of favor at court, it also formulates a Powhatan reprimand of the ingratitude of the colonists.

This study, which initially set out to uncover the response of a native American a

audience member to a masque at James I's court, could not find direct evidence of Pocahontas's reaction to the masque, though I did find in the writings of the colonists moments when their discursive certainties hesitated and an alternative perspective entered the text. This work began to allow me to understand some of the discursive processes that constructed the codes that led to the destruction of Powhatan language and culture and that activated an American boy to spit at the statue of an Indian woman.

GABRIELE PALEOTTI ON THE GROTESQUE IN
PAINTING: STRETCHING OLD CULTURAL HORIZONS TO
FIT A BRAVE NEW WORLD

CLAIRE FARAGO, UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

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The following short essay is included in this newsletter as a result of a conversation I had with Beth Robertson about the role of the grotesque in defining cultural boundaries in Western art. It is a fragment—or maybe just a figment—of a longer study of the modern status of the visual arts. *Grotteschi*—the word refers literally to a kind of pictorial embellishment composed of playful, monstrous figures in ancient painting and architectural ornament—had long been associated with the active powers of the imagination when they became emblematic of the process of artistic invention in mid sixteenth-century Italy. *Grotteschi* signified in a doublehanded way: on one hand, *grotteschi* stood for the artist's freedom and capacity to invent anything out of his imagination; on the other hand, and for the same reason, *grotteschi* were associated with irrational mental activity, unrestrained by human reason. Depending upon one's critical stance, grotesque inventions can be the occasion for admiration or repulsion. The category of the grotesque is one of the most significant and loaded categories in the history of Western art criticism.

In the late sixteenth century, nearly three decades after the Council of Trent issued its famous decree banning all "seductive charm" in sacred images, Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti, then Bishop of Bologna, wrote his treatise to correct the abuses of contemporary artists.¹ Paleotti's greatest challenge lay in defining the limits of artistic license, based on the premise that capricious fantasies which have no counterpart in the real world are inadmissible. To exclude certain pictorial ornaments, he had to justify his exclusions, which led him to seek universal rules. In the end, Paleotti constructed new cultural boundaries that favored painting in the scientific style of optical naturalism—indeed, the reform of devotional painting began with the Caracci Academy in Bologna, founded in 1582, the year of Paleotti's publication.²

Paleotti tried to make room for representations that *could* be capricious fantasies, but should *not* be considered as such because they actually *do* exist in nature. Western critical language for evaluating pictorial embellishment had been couched in optical metaphors since Antiquity, and terms of praise and blame such as "brilliant," "vivid" and "obscure," were never a transparent code; rather, they refer to a complex system of figuration, based on the assumption that abstract content can be communicated in images presented to the senses. In sixteenth-century Italy the practice of painting and sculpture was the site of a complex discourse about figuration. The work of artifice was most often judged as part of