Captain John Smith arrived in Virginia in 1607 with the first ships to establish an English colony there, and played a prominent role in the colony’s interactions with the Powhatan Indians during its first two years. I have previously described the events of the winter of 1607/1608, when he was captured by the Powhatans and conducted through a month-long series of rituals which, I argued, created a place for the colony in the Powhatan world (Gleach 1994). Nine months later, in early September 1608, Smith left Jamestown with four men to take word to Powhatan that presents had been brought for him from England, and that he should come to Jamestown to receive them. When they arrived at his village of Werowocomoco, however, Powhatan was “thirty miles off” (Smith 1986a:235), and had to be sent for. Smith writes,

In the meantime his women entertained Smith in this manner:

In a fair plain field they made a fire, before which, he sitting upon a mat, suddenly amongst the woods was heard such a hideous noise and shrieking that they [Smith and his men] betook them to their arms, supposing Powhatan with all his power came to surprise them. But the beholders, which were many, men, women, and children, satisfied the Captain there was no such matter, being presently presented with this antic: thirty young women came naked out of the woods (only covered behind and before with a few green leaves) their bodies all painted, some white, some red, some black, some particolor, but every one different. Their leader had a fair pair of stag’s horns on her head, and an otter skin at her girdle, another at her arm, a quiver of arrows at her back, and bow and arrows in her hand; the next in her hand a sword, another a club, another a pot-stick, all horned alike; the rest every one with their several devices. These fiends with most hellish cries and shouts, rushing from amongst the trees, cast themselves in a ring about the fire, singing and dancing with excellent ill variety, often falling into their infernal passions, and then solemnly again to sing and dance. Having spent near an hour in this mascarade, as they entered, in like manner departed. Having reaccommodated themselves, they solemnly invited Smith to their lodging, but no sooner was he within the house,
but all these nymphs more tormented him than ever, with crowding and pressing, and hanging upon him, most tediously crying, "love you not me?" This salutation ended, the feast was set, consisting of fruit in baskets, fish and flesh in wooden platters, beans and peas there wanted not (for twenty hogs), nor any savage dainty their invention could devise; some attending, others singing and dancing about them. This mirth and banquet being ended, with firebrands (instead of torches) they conducted him to his lodging. (Smith 1986a:235–6)

When Powhatan arrived the next day, he refused to go to Jamestown, and the presents were instead taken to him at Werowocomoco, where the oft-discussed coronation of Powhatan by Christopher Newport took place (Smith 1986a:237; cf. Jennings 1975:116–7, Rountree 1990:47). While scholars have sacrificed many trees to discussion of the coronation, a ceremony of European origin, remarkably little attention has been paid to the dance that preceded it by a few days. When mentioned, the dance has generally been treated as being merely an entertaining performance for the Englishmen. Rountree, who has given it the most attention, pointed out its similarity to the fancy-dancing of modern powwows, and related it to English social dances, simply suggesting that “Music making and dancing used up excess energy and promoted cohesion among people” (1989:98–99). Her later work mistakenly places the dance a few days later, when Newport went to Werowocomoco with the presents; there, she says only that “they were entertained by several young women who put on a warlike dance” (Rountree 1990:47).

Is there anything more to it than this? Internal evidence suggests that there may well be: there are several features to this performance that are inexplicable, on the surface. Perhaps most obvious, to anyone who is familiar with the dance traditions of the area, is that this is not a style of dance that is normally appropriate for women. In traditional dance women dance demurely, compared to men, not as described here, “falling into... infernal passions.” Their attire is also unusual: they were under-dressed, and women did not generally wear antlers or carry weapons in

1 Hank Dobyns pointed me in this direction when he asked me, in conversation at the Newberry Library several years ago, how I would interpret this dance. At the time, I had no good answer. I now have, at least, a beginning. I would also like to thank Terry Turner, Jane Fajans, Andie Palmer, and Vilma Santiago-Irizarry for conversations that have pushed this analysis along.
their dances. And finally, what is to be made of the second scene, where Smith is surrounded by young women crying, “Love you not me?”

Internal evidence also suggests a resolution to this dilemma. The painting and feasting suggest the possibility that this might have been a ritual event, not simply a performance for entertainment. Several key points in this performance — the antlers, weapons, and style of dance — would be appropriate to a men’s dance, and of course inversion is a common component in ritual. At first glance the play and teasing here might seem to be out of keeping with a ritual context, but in fact associations of play and ritual are common (cf. Huizinga 1955:14–27); my own work on playful aspects in Powhatan violence (e.g., Gleach 1993) is also relevant here.

I would like to briefly discuss here some of the relevant literature on mimesis and play. While it may sometimes seem that “mimesis” and “the ludic” are displacing “hegemony” as the fashionable buzzwords in anthropology, it is important to remember that these ideas have a considerable history in the social sciences, and that they are highly relevant to the study of ritual events. The study of play and mimesis in ritual dates at least to the early 1930s, with the work of Leo Frobenius (e.g., 1933), and is further developed in Johan Huizinga’s Homo ludens (1955), first published in 1944. In Huizinga’s framework, ritual is a special case of play, establishing a temporary, specialized space and time, and ordered by a set of rules different from those of everyday life:

Primitive, or let us say, archaic ritual is thus sacred play, indispensable for the well-being of the community, fecund of cosmic insight and social development but always play in the sense Plato gave to it — an action accomplishing itself outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life. (Huizinga 1955:25–26)

Where there is an implicit rationalism acting in Frobenius’s analysis, with ritual play ultimately being driven by its function — i.e., the representation of an event in order to bring it into being — Huizinga emphasized the process of play itself, the ritual space and rules that are an inherent part of play. This was further developed by Gregory Bateson in his discussion of psychological “frames” in play (1987:184–190). The frame is a delimited context, establishing a specific ground against which the
actions framed are to be viewed, itself locatable within a larger context (Bateson 1987:188–9; cf. 1987:14–20).

One way frames of ritual and play can be understood is in terms of the rules that operate within them, that are directly related to the ritual space — an imaginary situation, in Vygotsky’s terms:

Whenever there is an imaginary situation in play, there are rules — not rules that are formulated in advance and change during the course of the game but ones that stem from an imaginary situation. (Vygotsky 1978:95)

These rules in play are more critical than those of everyday life; to break a rule of play, or to suffer an interruption, or a disenchantment, destroys the field of meaning created by those rules, destroys the ritual space (Huizinga 1955:21). The shift in denotational meaning from “territory” to “map”, in Bateson’s terms (1987:179–182) — the removal from the “real” to the “imaginary” — is fragile; an action taking place in a ritual space, perceived as being real, ceases to be play or ritual and becomes real (cf. Bateson 1987:182–4). This derives from the unique position of playful performance, occupying a ritual space that is still part of the real world. As Vygotsky notes for play in general,

How does the child float from one object to another, from one action to another? This is accomplished by movement in the field of meaning — which subordinates all real objects and actions to itself. Behavior is not bound by the immediate perceptual field. This movement in the field of meaning predominates in play. On the one hand, it represents movement in an abstract field... On the other hand, the method of movement is situational and concrete... In other words, the field of meaning appears, but action within it occurs just as in reality. (Vygotsky 1978:101, emphasis added)

It is the essence of play that a new relation is created between the field of meaning and the visual field — that is, between situations in thought and real situations. (Vygotsky 1978:104)

It is from these relations created between the ritual field of meaning and reality itself that the transformative potential of ritual stems. The imagined version of the real — the mimetic copy — is engaged in action through ritual performance — but ritual performance also, inherently, engages reality. As Terry Turner (1996) notes, mimesis becomes poiesis, becomes “productive of the reality that is imitated”.
Using these conceptions of ritual play, mimesis, and transformation, let's examine the performance witnessed by Smith. Its nature as ritual has already been suggested; its nature as performance is clearly indicated by the organization of space: a fire built in a level open field, with an audience seated before it. The beginning of this ritual performance is marked by yelling and shrieking coming from the woods, of such intensity that Smith feared they were under attack.

Before turning to the dance itself, let's examine this framing mechanism — for such it undoubtedly is. Note that closure of the ritual performance is marked in the same way: “Having spent near an hour in this mascarade, as they entered, in like manner [they] departed.” There is movement on several levels here between the cultural and the natural. The relationships we dichotomize as natural:supernatural and culture: nature are not marked in the same ways in Native world views, of course, and what I am denoting here as nature is not a raw, completely uncultured wilderness, but that space of the sacred, lying between the cultured and the truly wild, representing a (super)natural order rather than the cultural order of everyday human life. There is obvious physical movement between these two realms in this ritual. Furthermore, Smith seems to have been capable of differentiating Powhatan speech from nonspeech vocalizations — he refers in his description of a mock battle to a shift from “singing after their accustomed tune, which they use only in wars”, to “such horrible shouts and screeches as so many infernal hellhounds could not have made them more terrible” (Smith 1986c:120) — and what he describes here is clearly in the latter terms: “a hideous noise and shrieking”; “most hellish cries and shouts”. Ritual itself is a cultural process. The framing mechanism here, in its origin and in its sounds, is emphasizing the natural. In combination with the physical movement of the women, from woods to dance ground and back again, this suggests that an interface between the (super)natural and the cultural is being established.

This is echoed in the attire of the dancers. Instead of wearing the usual piece of fringed deerskin tied about the waist like a skirt (Smith 1986b:160–1), they are “only covered before and behind with a few green leaves.” Smith does note that “the common sort” had little for clothing other than leaves (1986b:161), but these dancers are women participating
in a public ceremony, unlikely to be only "the common sort" — in fact Smith refers to them as Powhatan's women, which might even have meant his wives. The green leaves here seem likely to be markers of a closeness to the natural, particularly since they are worn in conjunction with stags' antlers. Furthermore, the use of red, black, and white pigment itself marks or even creates a connection with the extra-cultural; these colors have symbolic meanings that relate to such processes as transformation and the crossing of boundaries, and thus appear commonly in contexts such as ritual and war. Red signified the powerful and potentially destructive power of blood, and black represented the smoke and charcoal of fire, an agent of transformation and means of carrying messages to the spirits (Gleach 1992:58–59). The meaning of white is less clear, but is particularly noted among the Powhatans in the huskanaw, the puberty rite whereby young men obtained their spirit guardians (Smith 1986b:171).

The women now rush into the field, forming a dance circle around the fire. These women, however, as suggested before, are marked in several ways as male. In addition to being more "natural" than the usual fringed deerskin skirts, the wearing of leaves as described is more reminiscent of a breech-cloth — men's clothing. The wearing of pigments as described is also suggestive of male practice: while both genders painted their heads and shoulders red, the use of other colors and the painting of the rest of the body was apparently confined to men; women wore tattoos on their bodies instead (cf. Rountree 1989:73–77). Similarly, men were the hunters and warriors, associated with weapons, but at least the leaders of this dance carried arms. They also wore antlers. This was not a routine practice, but several individual men were observed wearing them in important contexts where only a male would be an appropriate actor — chiefs greeting visitors, and the priests presenting candidates at the huskanaw. Since antlers are an obvious marker of maleness in deer, this is probably an intentional evocation; not a mimetic process of becoming a stag, since other attributes of the stag were not copied, but simply an appropriation of the marker, and possibly an appeal to the (super)natural as the source of maleness. In this context, however, along with the other markers noted here, it is mimetic: these
women have put on the symbolic trappings of men, changing their gender in a ritual inversion.

The dance itself is poorly described by comparison. There is apparently an alternation between a normal style of singing and dancing and an impassioned abandonment. This is indeed reminiscent of modern men's fancy-dancing, but in more general terms it is at least more like men's than women's dancing, continuing the theme of ritual inversion. Not only have the dancers become men in their appearance, but in their behavior. We cannot know from the description, but there may also have been an element of parody here, of playfulness and exaggeration. The alternation also continues the movement across the nature/culture line, from ordered action to abandoned frenzy and back again. After about an hour of this performance, the dancers return to the woods, and the performance frame is closed.

There are thus two principal themes pervading this ritual: the movement between nature and culture, and a unidirectional inversion of gender. Women become male, but men do not even appear as actors. While "the meaning" of this ritual can never be certain, it is probably implicated in the constitution of male identity. In this context, the origins of all things are extra-cultural, taking place in a mythic time-space; strength and ability, especially for men, comes through access to extra-cultural agents: guardians and other spirit-beings. Because of their role in reproduction, women are inherently creative and potent, and occupy a position of power in the relations of nature and culture, in the crossing of these domains. This makes them the ideal agents for producing "controlled infusions of power and creativity into the level of ordinary social life" (Turner 1996). Women, acting as men, constitute the "nature" of men through ritual mimetic play.

What then is to be made of the next incident, immediately prior to the feasting, where these same women rushed in and flung themselves at Smith? I'm going out on a very thin limb here, but I would like to suggest the possibility that they were continuing to play with the same issues, no longer in a ritual, productive frame, but in a playful, parodic frame. Where the dance was a ritual reaffirming and reconstituting Powhatan men, this incident is a game, perhaps invoking what Powhatan women saw as typical male behavior for these Englishmen. There is no
direct evidence of how the colonists behaved towards Powhatan women, but we do know that they were a colony of relatively young men, many with military experience, and entirely without women, and that Powhatan hospitality could include furnishing a sexual partner to a visitor. Accounts agree that Powhatan women were attractive to the English colonists in at least some features (e.g., Strachey 1953:71, Smith 1986c:114–5), and Pocahontas lost no time finding a mate after her conversion to Christianity six years later. It seems not too great a leap to assume that at least some of the colonists might have propositioned Powhatan women whenever possible. Furthermore, the women enacting this parody were evidently successful in hitting a nerve in Smith; he characterized their action as “tediously crying” and as torment, suggesting a degree of embarrassment beyond what one might expect. We know from Smith’s accounts that he felt it was important for the colonists to exhibit control, and he was clearly ashamed of some of their behavior (cf. Smith 1986c:186–7). Significantly, the Powhatan word-list recorded by Strachey (1953:174–207) in the early years of the colony includes words for “to lie with a woman — Saccasak”, “to lie together — Cowiihpaantamun”, “a cuckold — Wimpenton”, “the privities or secret of a man — Pocohaac”, “a woman’s secret — Muttusk, Mucosiit”, “a woman’s breast — Otaus”, “I love you — Nouwmais”, and “you love [me] — Commomais”. The knowledge of this vocabulary itself indicates an interest in this area among the English, and taken together with Smith’s evident embarrassment supports the interpretation that these Powhatan women were pointing out a perceived foible of the Englishmen.

To summarize this interpretation, I have suggested that the dance was a ritual for the renewal and affirmation of the ideal of Powhatan maleness, enacted by women, in a ritual frame involving transformation of the extra-cultural into the cultural, through a mimetic inversion in which the women became men. These female men employed a constitutive power through this ritual. They then engaged in a parodic mimesis, playing the parts of Englishmen to taunt Smith and his companions. The first instance is a construction of identity; the second a playful commentary on an identity they had no role in constructing.

The final act marking the end of this ritual frame, in typical Powhatan fashion, was the feast, featuring great quantities of staples and every
delicacy available. Feasting provides an opportunity for the social relations engendered in ritual to be made operational; people return to their roles of everyday life, as those roles have been defined and empowered in the ritual. In this case, the identities of Powhatan men have been renewed, but the Englishmen remain unreconstructed. I suspect that the dance and feast were planned for that time, that Smith and his companions were simply invited to join as observers, and that the taunting was added in the spirit of the moment. The ritual content seems too significant to be impromptu, but it is unlikely that Smith’s presence could have been expected. It seems highly unlikely that this entire performance was staged as an entertainment.

The theoretical frameworks employed in this interpretation can also be seen in other Powhatan rituals, including the ritual of redefinition and adoption previously discussed (Gleach 1994). Bateson’s idea of the relationships between map and territory, for instance, can be clearly seen in the creation of maps in that ritual, which is explicitly concerned with processes of transformation. Unlike that ritual, however, the dance discussed here is primarily a ritual for maintenance rather than transformation, and some of the differences seen in the employment of mimesis, for example, stem from that difference. These analyses of meaning, using the documentary sources along with theoretical constructions of ritual, together provide an understanding of the Powhatan world not otherwise possible.

REFERENCES


