

Cheese, Worms, and Religion

Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* is one of a small number of historical texts that reads like a novel, yet is well-researched and thoroughly documented with extensive end notes. Ginzburg relates the story of Menocchio, a run-of-the-mill Italian miller in the 16th century, who faces two trials for heresy and finally executed in late June or early July 1601. To 20th-century readers, Menocchio's crime was that of reading and absorbing a wide variety of books and then developing his own thoughts toward religion based on his ^{own} life's experience, background, and reading list.

Ginzburg's central argument is that the oral tradition of the lower class combined with the growing popularity of the written word to enable, for a short time, an exchange of ideas across class lines. The peasant class benefited more from this exchange than did the aristocrats. Since books were largely the property of the educated upper class, this meshing of ideas was not wide-spread and in the end, the Catholic Church tried very hard to suppress the effects of the proliferation of books through torture and execution. The peasant was resistant to the teachings of the upper class, since the long oral tradition gave him a deep background to rely on. (112) The widening popularity of books damaged the idea that educated people enjoyed a monopoly on culture and that culture was an upper

class privilege. (60) The oral tradition of the lower class gave peasants a common base of myths and traditions passed down through the generations (117), while the addition of fresh ideology through books led men like Menocchio to start branching out with their own thoughts. ^{Oral popular traditions} The meshing of upper class and lower class created a filter made up of generations of oral tradition that the written word had to be processed through. (33) ✓

The books that men like Menocchio read are not as important as this filter; it is what comes out the other side of the filter that gets turned into new ideology.

The story of Menocchio, from shortly before his first trial to his execution, supports Ginzburg. Menocchio sought knowledge from books, which most likely included a vernacular Bible, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the *Fioretto della Bibbia*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Mandeville's *Travels*, and possibly an Italian translation of the Qur'an. He then synthesized his own theological concepts that were part Catholic, part Lutheran, part Anabaptist, part pagan, and part his own. (18-19) Menocchio was not content to swallow these influences whole, however, and was proud of the uniqueness of his synthesized Christianity. (59)

Ginzburg also uses two other men, Scolio and Baroni, to support his argument. Both of these men developed religious ideas similar to Menocchio's. Their stories are not as in-depth as Ginzburg's treatment of Menocchio. Both serve to reinforce Ginzburg's argument in that all three men were products of the same culture and

produced ideas that ran along very similar lines. Though Menocchio's ideas were the most complicated, all three men simplified Christianity to its basics. They all subscribed to the Ten Commandments and an egalitarian concept of religion while denying or downplaying the sacraments, the saints, hell, purgatory, and the eternal soul. (9-12, 118)

The Reformation and the Counter-Reformation must have made it difficult for common folk to understand fully any of the religious movements of the day. The Catholic Church was trying valiantly to re-establish its hold on the populace, while Lutheranism and other Protestant strains were struggling to maintain their new converts and gain new adherents. With the proliferation of books and growing literacy clashing with generations of oral traditions, the 16th century was indeed an intellectually exciting time. Exciting though it was, it must have been quite confusing as well. Menocchio's is the most well documented surviving story of the non-witchcraft related "heresies" of the day and it paints an interesting picture on how a person acquires a personal understanding of religion.

In some aspects, Menocchio was as common as any other peasant miller. He was neither rich nor poor; though he claimed to be "very poor" at his first trial, he was able to provide his daughter Giovanna a decent dowry. (1-2) Apart from his trade and economic position, though, Menocchio held little else in common with his fellow villagers. Because of his literacy, he was able to hold the positions of village mayor and parish church

administrator, jobs he apparently performed well. (3) He was opinionated and not afraid to share his theological ideas with his neighbors and customers; this sharing of ideas served to increase his sentence following his first trial. (91)

A consistent egalitarian nature can be seen in Menocchio's Christianity, which could be derived from a combination of Lutheranism, which reduced the importance of the priest and increased the role of the layman, and Menocchio's own situation, peasantry, where every peasant was basically equal to every other peasant. This came out in Menocchio's rejection of the God of the priests and his claim that God distributes power (virtú) equally among men whether they are priest, pope, or peasant. (68)

Though somewhat unrealistic at the time, this concept of equal distribution of power would surely have appealed to Menocchio and his contemporaries.

Menocchio garnered his interpretations of other aspects of Christianity from various sources. He saw Jesus as a great prophet, but neither the son of God nor God incarnate, for the simple reason that he believed a true god could not be crucified. This view of Jesus is similar to one put forward in the Qur'an, the holy book of Muslims that Menocchio is likely to have read, and reinforced by his reading of Mandeville's *Travels*.

(43) His view of confession – that man should confess directly to God and not to any intermediary – he lifted from Mandeville's accounts of the Jacobites. (42)

Boccaccio's *Cento novelle*, the *Decameron*, and Mandeville were likely influences on Menocchio's tolerance of Jews and Muslims. His tolerance emerged as an organ of tradition; since Menocchio's father and grandfather had been Christians, so was Menocchio a Christian. However, he held no malice for other religions, as he thought they believed themselves to be as "correct" in their beliefs as any Christian. (49-51)

Therefore, according to Menocchio, adherence to religion was based on tradition and belief and no man could be brought down because of that.

The cheese and worms concept that gives the book its title is another aspect of Menocchio's Christianity that is outside accepted Catholic norms. He believed that the world was created from chaos in much the same way that cheese is created from milk, by mixing it all up until an identifiable mass emerged. As worms might appear in cheese, so did angels appear in the newly tamed chaos; the most high and holy of these angels was God, and the rest are subordinate to him. (5-6, 53) The odd thing about this metaphor is not its components. Menocchio might have started this theory based on a line from the *Decameron* and Vellutello's subsequent commentary on the line. What makes this metaphor interesting is that it looks both forward and backward to other theories of creation. By denying divine will as the prime motivation for creation, Menocchio looked forward to the Big Bang Theory, which claims that the universe and everything in it was created by a massive concentration of nebular matter which later exploded. He also

looked back to an ancient Indian concept of creation, one in which the gods beat the primordial sea until heaven and earth emerged from it.. (57-8)

Menocchio's synthesis of literature and ingrained beliefs was unfathomable to the Inquisitors that tried, tortured, and executed him. His mental process, uncommon at the time though it was, is perhaps typical to any who shared the combined influences of generations of common beliefs that suddenly came into contact with books containing fresh ideas and criticisms about Christianity. Ginzburg shows this through his comparisons of Scolio and Baroni to Menocchio, establishing that, while Menocchio's was the most well documented case of this kind of heresy, he was certainly not alone in his thoughts. Menocchio's process of absorbing Catholic and traditional concepts and then acquiring new knowledge through books and mixing it all together shows considerable intellect and ability, as well as courage to stand up to the Inquisitors when subjected to trial and torture. Menocchio, on the surface a common peasant, became caught between the oral traditions of previous generations and the emerging written word that was changing Europe around him. He simply did his best to incorporate all his learning with his background and establish a set of beliefs he could live with.

B+ A good synopsis of the book, but you might have had a more detailed discussion of how Menocchio read the texts, filtering the meaning through popular culture to create totally new ideas. Also, you never comment directly on Ginzburg's claim (p. 126) that elite culture triumphed over popular culture by 1600.