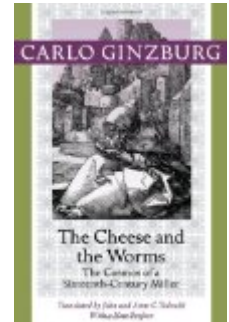


Carlo Ginzburg. *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. Translated by John and Anne C. Tedeschi. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013. xxxiii + 180 pp. \$22.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4214-0988-7.



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First published in Italian in 1976, Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* has now been published in more than twenty languages. Set to celebrate its fortieth anniversary next year, the monograph persists as one of the earliest and most influential examples of microhistory. In this new edition, the relevancy of *The Cheese and the Worms* is reaffirmed in the scholarship.

The book tells the story of an obscure miller names Menocchio. The story of Menocchio emerged from the Inquisitorial documents housed in the archives of the Curia Arcivescovile in Udine, the Friulian region of Italy. The two trial transcripts for Menocchio's heresy, dated 1584 and 1599, tell the story of an ordinary and well-liked man by contemporary standards with extraordinary ideas about religion and the cosmos. The accounts of witnesses, neighbors, and contemporaries of Menocchio's, as well as his own testimony, reveal a puzzling and obscure worldview set against the backdrop of two events that helped shape the modern world: the printing revolution and the Reformation. The printed book, according

to Ginzburg, created internal conflict within Menocchio and his traditional oral culture and also allowed him the ability to articulate his ideas and beliefs. The Reformation "gave him the courage to express his feelings" (p. xxxi). The testimony reveals that Menocchio often spoke freely throughout the small Italian hill town of Monteleone, voicing his thoughts and opinions about the church and espousing his religious beliefs to the townspeople.

Ginzburg asserts that Menocchio gained his unique worldview from a mixture of oral culture and themes related to contemporary heretical groups with humanistic backgrounds. Although the origins of Menocchio's beliefs are often difficult to discern, Ginzburg contends that they derive, in part, from several literary texts available in the sixteenth century. However, and perhaps more important to the theme of the book, Menocchio's beliefs are rarely traced back to a particular source with certainty, but rather identified with particular elements of the original text. In studying Menocchio's unique interpretations, Ginzburg

discovered that the miller imposed a filter “unconsciously between himself and the text,” and he believes understanding this is key to grasping the relationship the miller had with written text (p. ix).

In the recent edition, published in 2013 by the Johns Hopkins University Press, Ginzburg provides a provocative new preface in which he reflects upon his writing and the evolution of his methodological process, which began in the 1950s, well before he discovered the Friulian miller Domenico Scandella, affectionately called Menocchio by contemporaries. Quite forthcoming and humble, Ginzburg offers a unique retrospective interpretation of how a historian never really learns everything about a subject. He offers the contributions of other historians to the story of Menocchio as evidence. Recognizing that his book is not without its flaws, he credits Andrea Del Col with adding to the richness of Menocchio’s story with his valuable, critical edition of the trials, where Ginzburg had only offered the reader fragments of trial testimony. Most importantly, in the new edition Ginzburg highlights the problems inherent to studying members of society who were marginalized or persecuted. When examining cultures that relied heavily upon oral tradition, as many peasant societies often did, historians are typically confined to sources that those in positions of authority produced. As a word of caution, Ginzburg implores historians to see past the “filters” imposed by “their persecutors’ questions” in search of the voice of the marginalized (p. x).

The central challenge with the story of Menocchio, as Ginzburg warns the reader in the new preface, is that it is difficult to discern where the oral tradition ends and the written text references begin. Others have voiced this frustration, particularly Mark Phillips, who in his article “Histories, Micro-and Literary: Problems of Genre and Distance,” writes that no matter how close the reader feels emotionally to Menocchio, or how close to understanding his cosmology, “our insight

is always accompanied by uncertainty.” Rather than focusing on the events as they occurred, Phillips believes that Ginzburg formulated the story of the heretic Menocchio from a quest for “its elusive subject,” and compares the monograph to a murder mystery.[1]

In considering the question of how *The Cheese and the Worms* has “maintained its importance to early modern scholars,” Ginzburg himself offers the answer: the simultaneous exceptionalism and accessibility of Menocchio. Menocchio is unique in many ways; he is a peasant who can read, he has ideas and beliefs that are complex and often indicative of the educated class, and he differentiates his language, speaking in one to his fellow peasants and then in another to the members of the court (p. 62). Even though Menocchio is exceptional, his reason for being so, his “challenge to authority” and his unique interpretations of oral tradition combined with written text, Ginzburg believes, is something that resonates with both his contemporaries and modern readers (p. xiii). Menocchio gains the attention of the Inquisition because his beliefs are extraordinary, but his challenge to authority is more universal, and consequently, more dangerous in the eyes of the Inquisition.

Note

[1]. Mark Phillips, “Histories, Micro- and Literary: Problems of Genre and Distance,” *New Literary History* 34, no. 2 (2003): 211-229; 224.

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