Of Cheese and Worms, Cockfights and Cat Massacres

Born fifteen years after Martin Luther nailed his *95 Theses* to the door of a Wittenberg church, Domenica Scandella, known as Menocchio, developed and disseminated an avant-garde cosmology of his own. In his mind, contrary to orthodox Catholic teaching, priests lacked privileged power; sacraments, ranging from baptism to confirmation and marriage, emanated from human hands without divine direction; Scripture operated as an agent of deception rather than enlightenment; Mary was not a virgin, and thus Jesus was neither a miracle of virgin birth nor divine; human-human relationships ought to take precedence over human-divine relationships; confession could not obviate sins; and the origins of the world lay in spontaneously generative chaos. Likewise, he asserted a vision of religious pluralism and tolerance in which "Turks and Jews" co-exist with Christians as equal children of God. An amalgamation of practicality, moralism, and materialism constituted the Friulian miller's worldview. As Menocchio stated at his trial, "'I have an artful mind.'"[1]

In *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, Carlo Ginzburg argues that the Protestant Reformation and the printing press created an environment in which a miller could mix and match high literate culture and low peasant culture to interpret God and religion for himself. The Counter-Reformation then ushered in a climate in which the Catholic Church would pursue, prosecute, and execute this heretical peasant. For the historian, the very Inquisition that tormented Menocchio grants access to the ruminations of his mind, as the Roman authorities transcribed the trials verbatim. The end result of Menocchio's travails, the unusually long sentence issued by the court, tugged at Ginzburg, pushing him to delve into the

[1] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 4, 9-12, 16, 39, 54, 49-50, 12.

available records to reconstruct the miller's crimes and justifications. Yet legal transcripts, like all sources ranging from autobiographical recollections to ethnographic observations, offer only a starting point for analysis. Resurrecting Menocchio's mind demands determining and then connecting the sources of influence that made his claims sensible and meaningful to him.[2]

How, for example, did the one-time mayor of Montereale determine that God is "'nothing but earth, water, and air'" or that "'God was made from chaos'"? The second trial transcript proffers one answer: as Menocchio told his inquisitors, "'I have never met anyone who holds these opinions; my opinions came out of my own head.'" Even if we believe Menocchio's claim that no person taught him the beliefs he promulgated and that, akin to his assessment of God, his thoughts always existed and then emerged from internal chaos, we are left to wonder who or what *contributed* to his controversial remarks. Ginzburg avers that Menocchio failed to disclose Nicola da Porcia, a painter whose name embarrassed the miller in the first trial. But Nicola served as more than a mere discussion partner; he gave Menocchio books, including the *Decameron* and *Il sogno dil Caravia*. Menocchio himself mentioned eleven books over the course of two trials. Turning to the substance of these texts reveals the depth of the development of Menocchio's cosmos: because Menocchio read with "aggressive originality" and absorbed but did not parrot the literature he read, "Menocchio's obstinacy demonstrates that we aren't dealing with a passive reception of someone else's ideas."[3] Had the deviant miller expressed consistently unorthodox notions, identifying the source of the unusual but coherent belief-system might be sufficient. However, as his assertions suggest that he actively interpreted and intertwined the

[2] Ibid., xxiv, 59, 112, 117. Ginzburg notes in his preface that he discovered Menocchio while he was examining other inquisition records relating to witchcraft. The translators, John and Anne Tedeschi, helpfully provide background about the institution of the Roman Inquisition and the records it left (viii-ix).

[3] Ibid., 11, 54, 21-23, 28-30, 33, 27.

written material he encountered, Ginzburg reasonably sets out to find additional sources of Menocchio's inspiration.

Some of Menocchio's condemnations of the Church echoed those of the relatively recent Protestant dissenters: the Catholic hierarchy helps the wealthy exploit the poor, the priesthood obstructs direct relationships with God, and sacramental ritual is unnecessary. Yet core doctrinal issues, such as predestination and justification, confused the miller, signifying an unfamiliarity with the creed of the Anabaptists in the region and Lutheranism more generally. Ginzburg reconciles the appearance of Protestant influence in Menocchio's testimony with his lack of facility with formal theological stances by highlighting the endurance of peasant culture: "By breaking the crust of religious unity, the Reformation indirectly caused these old beliefs to emerge; the Counter-Reformation, attempting to restore unity, brought them into the light of day in order to sweep them away." Thus whether he realized it or not, Menocchio used peasant ideology, transmitted orally from generation to generation, to make sense of the literature he read. As Ginzburg sees it, the resonance of anti-ritualistic creed, for example, stems directly from the pre-Christian traditions still circulating in rural areas. Underscored by the complementary example of Scolio, a utopian poet who also advanced a radically simple Christianity devoid of the Church organization, Ginzburg anchors Menocchio's cosmos in peasant radicalism, fomented by ongoing class struggle.[4]

Read against the backdrop of the sixteenth-century conflict between the peasantry and nobility in Northern Italy, Menocchio's rejection of the Church could reasonably encompass resistance to the dominant class. There is a certain intuitive logic to this claim. Steeped in local agrarian tradition, what sixteenth-century literate peasant would deny the utility of folklore and common frustrations in trying to comprehend dueling religious ideas? Herein lies a challenge for

[4] Ibid., 21, 112-117.

Ginzburg, however, as Menocchio does not himself point to the role of folklore in developing his own theory of religion.

Deciphering the folkloric contributions to Menocchio's cosmos requires reading the silences and implicit cues present in the inquisition transcript, a methodological task common to both historians and cultural anthropologists, albeit with different types of texts. A year after Ginzburg first published *The Cheese and the Worms*, Clifford Geertz offered *The Interpretation of Cultures*, a collection of essays that document his process for observing and making sense of other cultures. Just as Ginzburg honed in on a single unrepresentative miller to better understand the sixteenth-century peasant milieu, so too does Geertz draw upon a single interrupted cockfight to interpret characteristics of mid-twentieth-century rural Bali. Of the importance of the Balinese cockfight, Geertz for example, writes that "it is a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves." "Professional intruders," as Geertz refers to ethnographers, must gain sufficient access to their subjects to develop the skill to read and know events as authentic insiders, to see a Balinese cockfight as the Balinese see it. But Geertz does more than report what the Balinese tell him about the typically understudied cockfight; he assembles layers of meaning in order to offer an *interpretation* of the cockfight. Thus he describes the relevance of the traditional, if somewhat surreptitious, Balinese cockfight by stating "much of Bali surfaces in the cock ring. For it is only apparently cocks that are fighting there. Actually, it is men." Here Geertz makes an explanatory leap, symbolically substituting men for cocks (the frequent double entendre, he notes, is intentional). But the question remains, if men struggle with one another through their animal counterparts, what does this teach us about Bali? On the one hand, Geertz finds, "In the cockfight, man and beast, good and evil, ego and id, the creative power of aroused masculinity and the destructive power of loosened animality fuse in a

bloody drama of hatred, cruelty, violence, and death." On the other hand, as much as the cockfight and its attendant gambling insinuate messages about honor and status, "the cockfight…makes nothing happen….*[N]o one's status really changes*….the cockfight is 'really real' only to the cocks." Through brief episodes of bloody feathers and raucous bettors, status concerns become audible and legible. But the moment is fleeting, for the end of the fight, the death of a cock silences and erases, leaving only the anthropologist's record as evidence of this deep play.[5]

The meanings Geertz can attribute to the cockfight therefore emanate from his encounters with Balinese society more broadly. For Ginzburg, a historian of the sixteenth century, observations of Menocchio emerge only in written records, and he must unravel the twisted yarns without a surplus of contextual sources. Sorting through the trial transcripts leads him to infer that "it was not the books as such, but the encounter between the printed page and oral culture that formed an explosive mixture in Menocchio's head." However, despite repeated gestures to "a common peasant culture," "an autonomous current of peasant radicalism," "underground current of peasant radicalism," Ginzburg defines neither the content and boundaries of oral peasant culture nor its extension, peasant radicalism. He excels at deciphering references in Menocchio's recorded statements, but leaves the reader to assemble a working definition of peasant culture from assorted clues left in the narrative. From the outset, Ginzburg recognizes that peasant culture includes more than folklore, but also refers to "a common store of traditions, myths, and aspirations handed down orally over generations." Perhaps those "traditions, myths, and aspirations" are "the elemental, instinctive materialism of generation after generation of peasants." But that tradition could also refer to a world in which the figurative

[5] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1977, 2000), 448, 412, 417, 420-1, 443 (emphasis original).

language of metaphors is always meant literally or general intolerance for abstract rituals. Is peasant radicalism rooted in long-standing class conflict or reflective of more recent new world utopianism?[6]

In his explication of "The Great Cat Massacre of the Rue Saint-Severin," Robert Darnton also turns to the prevailing oral culture as a resource for better comprehending the apparent humor in a printing shop revolt. He recognizes that cat-killing was fairly common in mid-eighteenth-century France but wants to understand the cultural milieu that allowed cats to stand in for humans as objects of ridicule, disparagement, and the guillotine. While Darnton, like Ginzburg, wants to use the cat massacre as a window into "a basic ingredient of artisanal culture under the Old Regime," he more clearly separates the implication of the cat massacre for understanding artisanal culture (the massacre amused the journeymen because they goaded their master into unintentionally authorizing their symbolic assault on the bourgeois) and the use of oral folklore to explain a particular aspect of the massacre (the cacophonous caterwaul suggested "witchcraft, orgy, cuckoldry, charivari, and massacre").[7]

Historians such as Ginzburg and Darnton who engage in microhistory, attempting to discern elements of popular culture from the tidbits of individuals or singular events, can employ the methods of cultural anthropologists such as Geertz. But relying on archival sources from which to draw "thick description" and accompanying interpretations may tempt the historian to overextend the sources. As Ginzburg makes clear in his preface, the limits of written sources most often generated by the dominant classes present obstacles—or, at the very least, an opaque filter—that observations and interviews do not. Darnton's book offers one possible corrective. In his work, the cat massacre is one of an array of intriguing incidents and curious examples that

[6] Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, 51, xxi, 21, 115, xiv, 117, 61-2, 68, 82, 112.

[7] Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Vintage, 1985), 78, 100, 96-7.

shed light on popular culture in France; as such, no single event bears the weight of explaining popular culture and the uneven texture of multiple stories prevents one episode from interpretive dominance. In contrast, Ginzburg relies on Menocchio alone, asserting that "even a limited case (and Menocchio certainly is this) can be representative." Atypical of his class, as a literate miller who expounds his esoteric views to friends, foes, and family alike, Menocchio becomes a node of historical analysis who refracts elements of sixteenth-century Friulian peasant culture.[8]

To be sure, Ginzburg's language attests to the many unknowns that surround twentieth-century excavation of Menocchio's mind. Rhetorically, hedges play an important substantive role in *The Cheese and the Worms*. To take a few examples:

> But these coincidences, *or possible coincidences*, shouldn't mislead us
> It *seems to be* clear, at any rate, that books were part of daily life for these people
> Menocchio *probably* was seized by a doubt
> Menocchio's "spoken language," *to the extent we can speculate about it from the transcripts*…"

The use of "seems," the insertion of "possibly" and "probably," the transparency about speculation all underscore Ginzburg's keen awareness that educated guesswork comprises part of his argument. At other moments, however, Ginzburg deftly asserts interpretive omniscience. Witness, "Menocchio's manner of reading was *obviously* one-sided and arbitrary," or "a text so totally foreign to his experience and culture *would have been incomprehensible* to him." Likewise, when comparing Menocchio to Pighino, another miller, Ginzburg insists "*Truly* these millers, who had lived hundreds of kilometers apart and died without meeting, spoke the same language and shared the same culture." To render Menocchio's world comprehensible requires conjectures and hypotheses; but minds are notoriously difficult to inhabit and occasionally Ginzburg slips on a mantle of authority that overwhelms the evidence.[9]

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[8] Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, 5-10; Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms*, xii-xiv, xx-xxii.
[9] Ibid., 9, 31, 71, 90, 36, 108, 125 (emphasis added).

The imprecision and ambiguity bedeviling the terms "peasant culture" and "peasant radicalism" in *The Cheese and the Worms* thus results not from Ginzburg's inattention to the terms, but rather from his attempts to extract too much from them. In the preface, he sets out the goal to use Menocchio to "reconstruct a fragment" of early modern popular culture. This reconstruction supports his argument about early modern popular culture, namely that it did not exist either as an unchanged assimilation of high culture or as an eruption of ingenuity from the lower classes. Instead, peasant culture participated in "a circular relationship composed of reciprocal influences" bourgeois culture. In this analysis, Menocchio's story serves to *illuminate* the nature of peasant culture. But Ginzburg also relies on the idea of this peasant culture to *explain* how Menocchio built his ideas. It is reasonable to believe that peasant culture provided a foundation for Menocchio's ideas and, as a result, understanding the miller's worldview offers insight into that very culture.[10]

But to assume the influence of popular peasant culture as an embedded feature of Menocchio's thoughts means that Ginzburg must find traces of its presence when differentiating between presence of oral tradition and the miller's own lore is not necessarily obvious. Does Menocchio resist priestly intervention because peasant folktales portrayed God as a "kindly old man" for whom no intermediary would be necessary or because certain books critique the priesthood or because Menocchio had bad experiences with priests that do not emerge in the transcripts? The point is not that peasant culture did not influence Menocchio but rather that to argue first that Menocchio provides a window into peasant culture and then that peasant culture is a significant foundation of his heresy verges on the circular. Even if the independent-minded Menocchio expresses the circular relationship between bourgeois and peasant cultures that Ginzburg seeks to emphasize, Ginzburg's argument would benefit from more attention to the

[10] Ibid., xiv-xvi, xii.

content of presumed peasant culture akin to Danton's explication of cat lore in eighteenth-century France.[11] Despite this, Ginzburg offers tremendous insight into Menocchio's mind and world. Through a persistently creative reading of trial records, Ginzburg highlights the importance of attending to jarring and unexpected references. Moreover, *The Cheese and the Worms* reminds us that taking seriously the genesis of ideas incongruent in and of their time can only help refine larger cultural and intellectual histories of the period.

[11] Ibid., 112. Ginzburg identifies the source of the "kindly old man" as an English peasant, but does not address whether that tale circulated at the same time as Menocchio or whether it was common in Italy as well as England.