

**Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*,
translated by John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).**

The Cheese and the Worms is an early and celebrated work by Professor Carlo Ginzburg, currently at University of California, Los Angeles and a trailblazer in the field of microhistory. In this subfield of “new history” developed in the 1970s, historians analyze individuals, small communities or case studies to bring light upon greater questions. Here, Ginzburg studies the currents running through popular culture in 16th century Italy through the lens of the experiences and thoughts of Menocchio, a miller and heretic. However, he does not limit himself to mere description. With acute analysis, he examines the intersection between high and low culture, the effect of written literature on a predominantly oral culture and the influences working upon popular faith beyond the traditional tenets of Roman Catholicism.

The immediate sources of Professor Ginzburg’s book are the inquisitorial records he discovered by chance. These records cover both of the trials for heresy of Menocchio and include *verbatim* his own words as well as the questions and comments of the inquisitors. These records proved to be extremely valuable sources for not only Menocchio’s individual story but also for the greater picture Ginzburg is attempting to paint. However, there are naturally gaps in the knowledge they provide. To his credit, the author freely admits where these occur and attempts neither to paper over them, nor to reach conclusions that run counter to the evidence he has presented. Instead, he keeps to the evidence he has, reached his conclusions with a clear methodology and deep analysis.

From the text, it is clear that Ginzburg also has a broad working knowledge of medieval literature and theology. Menocchio himself read works like Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, the *Fioretto del Bibbia* and the *Travels of Sir*

John Mandeville as well as the *Bible* in the vernacular.¹ Knowing these texts allows Ginzburg to better evaluate Menocchio’s understanding of them as well as better convey to the reader their importance. Indeed, one of the most important points Ginzburg makes in his work is that Menocchio operated in a liminal zone between full reliance upon oral transmission of knowledge and upon written work. By comparing the real meaning of a text with what Menocchio was able to glean from it, it becomes clear that there was a wide disparity between the two. Ginzburg proposes that Menocchio was not getting his ideas from the texts themselves. Instead, his ideas came from deeply rooted oral traditions that Ginzburg proposes was common to the peasant class in the region, triggered by the books he read. When the miller read his books, he read them to provide him with confirmation of his established ideas, taking from them only snippets and distorted versions of the actual text. Ginzburg thus makes a case that Menocchio used an “interpretive filter” informed by the oral tradition to read the written word.²

Given the religious turmoil in 16th Europe in the wake of Martin Luther and his followers, at first glance it might appear that the reformation might have influenced some of Menocchio’s ideas. However, Ginzburg contends that this is unlikely to be the case. Although Menocchio may have had contact with religious rebels and heretics, those of his idea that do coincide with the beliefs of Lutherans or of the Anabaptists do so only in a piecemeal basis, suggesting a coincidence rather than a deliberate intent on Menocchio’s behalf. From this, Ginzburg deduces that peasant faith in Friuli might not have been so closely orthodox to the Catholic Church as the inquisitors

¹ Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 29.

² *Ibid*, 41

might have liked. Rather, the peasants and poor might have drawn upon the ancient, oral, pre-Christian pagan traditions in syncretism with Christianity to create a very unconventional belief system.

These intersections between oral and written transmission of knowledge, between orthodoxy and heresy, lead to Ginzburg's most interesting argument. He maintains that popular, "low" culture does not exist in a vacuum. Menocchio did turn to "high" culture to strengthen his own arguments and to inform his worldview. Similarly, the peasants of his village and of his region would not be immune to the influence of the nearby city of Venice. Books, although scarce, still passed about the region freely, opening up the readers up to new vistas and new ideas. Yet, high culture did not create and then utterly dominate peasant culture. Although his books influenced Menocchio, they only provided a veneer to his own thoughts; although the Catholic Church dominated Italy, Menocchio and others veered wildly from its dogma. Instead, Ginzburg argues, high and popular culture lived side by side in a reciprocal relationship, each influencing the other and both evolving together. Only through the understanding of popular culture, he suggests, can we fully understand high culture.

Ginzburg's conclusions are predicated, however, upon the suitability of Menocchio as an example to illustrate the Friuli peasantry. Certainly, he was an unusual figure. He was open about his strange beliefs and eventually suffered for it. When called upon as witnesses, the other villagers did testify against him to the inquisitors. Certainly, they evinced no understanding or support of Menocchio to the judges at his two trials. Nevertheless, for years and even decades they had not betrayed him to the church nor had they excluded him from communal life. To the contrary, Menocchio had held positions of responsibility within his village. This suggests that they had far more sympathy for Menocchio's ideas than they ever dared express to the Church. He was one of them and thus to use him to illustrate their lives seems not so unreasonable.

At first glance, Ginzburg has given the book a rather peculiar structure. He has divided it into over sixty very short chapters, some less than a page. After an introduction that sets the broad scene, the subsequent chapters go into increasing depth. As his analysis intensifies, the small chapters are helpful rather than a hindrance to readers, allowing them to digest a good deal of material in manageable chunks. Nevertheless, some of the theology might be a little difficult for those unfamiliar with Christian doctrine and although Ginzburg maintains he wrote his book for a general readership, the complexity of this and the detail into which he delves might be somewhat daunting to a non-historian.³ However, more than a specialist in early modern Italy can enjoy this work. Ginzburg's arguments about culture, religion and knowledge may be relevant and useful to both students and scholars.

Now in a paperback English translation, Ginzburg's classic microhistory can reach a whole new audience. With his meticulous analysis, eye for detail and scrupulous reference to his sources, he has written a work that is both a credible and an important history. Although ostensibly the account of the beliefs of one man, Ginzburg has made extrapolated to make convincing arguments for the effect of oral upon written culture, for the reciprocity of high and popular culture and for the variety of 16th century peasant belief. As such, it is a significant work and one that deserves to be read far beyond the bounds of the specialist field.

³ Ibid. Preface to the English Edition, xii