Book Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Carlo Ginzburg. *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth Century Miller*, translated by John and Anne Tedeschi. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980. Pp. xxvii, 177. \$14.00

Domenico Scandella, known as Menocchio, was a miller who lived in Friuli in the sixteenth century. In 1583, when he was fifty-one years old, he was denounced to the Holy Inquisition for espousing unorthodox views. His inquisitors, repelled and fascinated by what he said, questioned him at great length. The interrogations were scrupulously recorded and carefully preserved. The record of this one case is the subject of this remarkable book by the brilliant Italian historian, Carlo Ginzburg.

Ginzburg has been much influenced by recent developments in the field of social history, which have often stressed broad quantitative approaches to social phenomena. This approach has brought about a fundamental reorientation of our views of the Renaissance and Reformation era, as we now examine entire societies rather than a few great intellectuals and rulers. In the past few years, several social historians have focused attention on popular culture and religion in early modern Europe. This is an elusive subject that is more difficult to document than other sorts of social-historical studies. The evidence concerning the oral culture of the non-literate masses is spotty and almost always comes through the testimony of the learned elites, in legal records, accounts of episcopal visits to parishes, and missionaries' complaints of popular ignorance and indifference. The work by these historians has accomplished much in illuminating the life of the masses for us. But, in having to generalize from the available evidence, the historians of popular culture have tended to depict a uniform mass culture in which there is little room for individual differences.

Ginzburg's technique has been honed in several studies of heretical groups and is quite different. *The Cheese and the Worms* is concerned with one person; a little man caught up by a hostile instrument of elite culture, in a situation he could not control. Menocchio cannot be called a typical man of his age, yet his story tells us much about the men of his age. Menocchio was very much an individual, who does not conform to our stereotypes of the labouring classes of early modern Europe. He was literate, and his outlook was shaped by his reading. But he screened his reading through the filtre of his own mind and the oral popular

culture that surrounded him. Through this process he formed radical theological and social ideas which were unique to him but which reflected both aspects of his contemporary learned culture and ancient folkloric traditions.

Menocchio developed his own cosmogony. He believed that the world was formed out of a Chaos, as cheese forms from swirling milk, and was peopled with angels and God, as worms grow out of cheese (through spontaneous generation). This imagery is particularly interesting, possibly based partly on versions of Ovid. Strikingly similar imagery of cheese and worms appears in ancient Indian Vedic myths as well. In pointing this out, Ginzburg only suggests possible parallels without attempting to force any direct connection.

Menocchio's view of theology was essentially practical and moral, rejecting such spiritual notions as the immortality of the soul, the divinity of Christ and the Virgin Mary, as well as the sacramental role of the hierarchical church. Worst of all, the miller could not keep his views to himself, but preached to friends and acquaintances for years. Not surprisingly, he was denounced by a local priest. Rather than being frightened into prudent behavior, Menocchio seems to have been delighted to have finally had an audience of learned religious men who were eager to hear him out. After an interrogation stretching over several months, the Inquisition found him guilty of holding and spreading dangerous heretical views and sentenced him to life imprisonment. Menocchio was released only two years later as the result of an appeal made by his son. He behaved himself for several years, but returned to his old ways, breaking the conditions of his release from prison and preaching his odd views to friends and strangers. Again, in 1599, he was arrested. This time the inquisitors were sharper and more hostile, and only took a few weeks with him. Trapped in his own contradictions, Menocchio revealed himself to be a relapsed heretic. He was burnt at the stake on 6 July, 1601, by express order of Pope Clement VIII, just one of the many victims of the Church's two-pronged campaign to impose Tridentine Catholicism on learned intellectual dissenters and on the ignorant, restive masses.

Carlo Ginzburg has not been well known outside Italy, except for his important book, *I benandanti* (1966). In previous books and articles, he has made much use of Italian inquisitorial records, the main source for this work. The pattern of *The Cheese and the Worms* consists basically of relating passages from Menocchio's interrogations, interpreting and explaining their content and filling in with other information when it is necessary. In a fascinating discussion, Ginzburg lists the books that Menocchio said he had read, and shows the use that the miller made of his texts. Often Menocchio just selected key phrases to remember, magnifying them out of their context. Other times he distorted passages, changing or even reversing their meaning. This is one of the most important areas examined in this book. Even though the miller was exposed to aspects of the learned culture of his time, he did not come to share the outlook of the elites. The process of the transmission of ideas is a complex one, and as much attention must be paid to the receiver of ideas as to the ideas themselves.

The Cheese and the Worms is directed at a wide readership. The author has set the notes at the back of the book and has deliberately not placed reference numbers in the text. This was done to help the general reader enjoy the story of Menocchio without interruption by references to sources or arguments over inter-

pretations. However, for the reader who is interested in these matters, this arrangement is a nuisance, as one cannot know exactly where a source is being supplied, an interpretive point being discussed or additional information being given. Thus it is necessary to flip to the notes continually to prevent missing important information.

The Cheese and the Worms is an extraordinary book and we are fortunate to have the work of this very important historian available in English. The translation by John and Anne Tedeschi is lively and readable. Ginzburg's use of his materials shows greater sophistication in dealing with subtle issues of historical interpretation. While it is clear that his sympathies are with his sixteenth-century miller, he does not sentimentalize Menocchio or attempt to inflate him to a hero's status. Furthermore, he does not make monsters of the inquisitors. In fact, the inquisitors are left very vaguely defined. One would have appreciated a bit more discussion of the Roman Inquisition in post-Tridentine Italy, its organization, outlook, personnel and its effect upon society.

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Wilson, Jean. *Entertainments for Elizabeth I* (Studies in Elizabethan and Renaissance Culture II). Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 1980. Pp. 179. £12.00.

The 1570's were a decade of transition. The first Elizabethan pageants had presented Judith, Esther, and Deborah as models for the new queen, but Elizabeth chose not to emulate these married women who preserved the people and their religion. With the defeat of the Northern Rebellion in 1569, Elizabeth's regime appeared strong and durable, and with the entertainment of Elizabeth at Wanstead in 1578, even Leicester, it seemed, accepted that his queen would live according to the dictates of Diana rather than those of Juno. "After 1569," writes Jean Wilson, "rebellions gave way to plots... and the pressing need for Elizabeth to marry became less and less loudly expressed" (p. 2). Rule by Elizabeth alone created a problem however – the need "to devise a formula to make a female monarch acceptable" (p. 5). The entertainments brought together in this book, from the tilt-yard device for the French ambassadors in 1581 (*The Four Foster Children of Desire*) to the manor house shows at Cowdray and Elvetham in 1591 and at Bisham, Rycote, and Ditchley in 1592, represent part of the attempt by Elizabeth's courtiers to devise that formula.

Frances Yates and Roy Strong have shown how tilts and poetry, art and architecture defined the Queen's power and rationalized "the aristocratic structure of Elizabethan society" (*Astraea*, p.11) by celebrating Elizabeth as a Vestal Virgin, Astraea, or Cynthia. Jean Wilson's introduction to *Entertainments for Elizabeth I* is based solidly on their findings, but it emphasizes different material and goes beyond their work. Wilson concentrates on the association of medieval and classical motifs, on the importance of imagery, actions, and characters from romance to the cult of Elizabeth. Poetry of Shakespeare, Spenser, Sidney, and Davies, Wilson argues, attested to the currency of this "mingling of classicism and medievalism" (p. 17), while the entertainments demonstrated its usefulness.