

F. Church and T. George (Leiden, 1979), pp. 232–49. Readers wishing to learn more about the productive career of Carlo Ginzburg, the brilliant young scholar who is the author of this book, are invited to turn to the profile by Anne J. Schutte, "Carlo Ginzburg," *Journal of Modern History* 48 (1976): 296–315.

Our translation benefited greatly from the many constructive criticisms and suggestions received from the author and from the staff and consultants of The Johns Hopkins University Press, especially Henry Y. K. Tom, Mary Lou Kenney, and Eduardo Saccone. Professors Paolo Cherchi of The University of Chicago and Ronnie Terpening of Loyola University, Chicago, struggled with us patiently over a number of mystifying terms of sixteenth-century Friulian dialect. Bernard E. Wilson of The Newberry Library read the entire manuscript of the text and left his mark on almost every page. We are extremely grateful to him as well as to all others named and unnamed whose advice and support helped to bring *The Cheese and the Worms* into being.

With mixed sentiments of sadness and relief we take leave of this book and its quixotic protagonist, Menocchio. We feel confident that both will capture the reader's esteem and affection, as they did ours.

J. T.

A. C. T.

## PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION



As frequently happens, this research, too, came about by chance. In 1962 I spent part of the summer in Udine. In the extremely rich (and at that time still unexplored) deposit of inquisitorial papers preserved in the Archivio della Curia Arcivescovile of that city I was searching for trials against a strange Friulian sect whose members were identified with witches and witchdoctors by the judges. Later I wrote a book about them (*I benandanti: Stregoneria e culti agrari tra Cinquecento e Seicento* [1966; reprinted., Turin, 1979]). Leafing through one of these manuscript volumes of trials I came upon an extremely long sentence. One of the accusations against the defendant was that he maintained the world had its origin in putrefaction. This phrase instantly captured my curiosity; but I was looking for other things: witches, witchdoctors, *benandanti*. I wrote down the number of the trial. In the next few years that notation periodically leaped out from among my papers and from my memory. In 1970 I resolved to try to understand what that statement could have meant for the person by whom it had been uttered. At that time what I knew about him was only his name: Domenico Scandella, called Menocchio.

This book tells his story. Thanks to an abundant documentation we are able to learn about his readings and his discussions, his thoughts and his sentiments—fears, hopes, ironies, rages, despairs. Every now and then the directness of the sources brings him very close to us: a man like

But he is also a man very different from us. The analytical reconstruction of this difference was necessary, in order to reconstruct the physiognomy, partly obscured, of his culture, and of the social context in which it had taken shape. It has been possible to trace Menocchio's complicated relationship with written culture: the books (or, more precisely, some of the books) that he read and the manner in which he read them. In this way there emerged a filter, a grill that Menocchio interposed unconsciously between himself and the texts, whether obscure or illustrious, which came into his hands. This filter, on the other hand, presupposed an oral culture that was the patrimony not only of Menocchio but also of a vast segment of sixteenth-century society. Consequently, an investigation initially pivoting on an individual, moreover an apparently unusual one, ended by developing into a general hypothesis on the popular culture (more precisely, peasant culture) of preindustrial Europe, in the age marked by the spread of printing and the Protestant Reformation—and by the repression of the latter in Catholic countries. This hypothesis can be linked to what has already been proposed, in very similar terms, by Mikhail Bakhtin, and can be summed up by the term "circularity": between the culture of the dominant classes and that of the subordinate classes there existed, in preindustrial Europe, a circular relationship composed of reciprocal influences, which traveled from low to high as well as from high to low. (Exactly the opposite, therefore, of "the concept of the absolute autonomy and continuity of peasant culture" that has been attributed to me by one critic—see notes pp. 154–55.)

*The Cheese and the Worms* is intended to be a story as well as a piece of historical writing. Thus, it is addressed to the general reader as well as to the specialist. Probably only the latter will read the notes—which have been deliberately placed at the end of the book, without numerical references, so as not to encumber the narrative. But I hope that both will recognize in this episode an unnoticed but extraordinary fragment of a reality, half obliterated, which implicitly poses a series of questions for our own culture and for us.

I should like to express my warmest thanks to my friends John and Anne Tedeschi for the patience and intelligence with which they have translated this book.

## PREFACE TO THE ITALIAN EDITION



1

❖ In the past historians could be accused of wanting to know only about "the great deeds of kings," but today this is certainly no longer true. More and more they are turning toward what their predecessors passed over in silence, discarded, or simply ignored. "Who built Thebes of the seven gates?" Bertolt Brecht's "literate worker" was already asking. The sources tell us nothing about these anonymous masons, but the question retains all its significance.

2

❖ The scarcity of evidence about the behavior and attitudes of the subordinate classes of the past is certainly the major, though not the only, obstacle faced by research of this type. But there are exceptions. This book relates the story of a miller of the Friuli, Domenico Scandella, called Menocchio, who was burned at the stake by order of the Holy Office after a life passed in almost complete obscurity. The records of his two trials, held fifteen years apart, offer a rich picture of his thoughts and feelings, of his imaginings and aspirations. Other documents give us information

about his economic activities and the lives of his children. We even have pages in his own hand and a partial list of what he read (he was, in fact, able to read and write). Though we would like to know much more about Menocchio, what we do know permits us to reconstruct a fragment of what is usually called "the culture of the lower classes" or even "popular culture."

3

❖ The existence of different cultural levels within so-called civilized societies is the premise of the discipline that has come to be defined variously as folklore, social anthropology, history of popular traditions, and European ethnology. But the use of the term "culture" to define the complex of attitudes, beliefs, codes of behavior, etc., of the subordinate classes in a given historical period is relatively recent and was borrowed from cultural anthropology. Only through the concept of "primitive culture" have we come to recognize that those who were once paternalistically described as "the common people in civilized society" in fact possessed a culture of their own. In this way the bad conscience of colonialism joined itself to the bad conscience of class oppression; if only verbally we have now gone beyond not only the antiquated conception of folklore as the mere collecting of curious facts but also the attitude that saw in the ideas, beliefs, and world views of the lower classes nothing but an incoherent fragmentary mass of theories that had been originally worked out by the dominant classes perhaps many centuries before. At this point a dialogue began concerning the relationship between the culture of the subordinate classes and that of the dominant classes. To what degree is the first, in fact, subordinate to the second? And, in what measure does lower class culture express a partially independent content? Is it possible to speak of reciprocal movement between the two levels of culture?

Historians have approached questions such as these only recently and with a certain diffidence. Undoubtedly, this is due in part to the widespread persistence of an aristocratic conception of culture. Too often, original ideas or beliefs have been considered by definition to be a product of the upper classes, and their diffusion among the subordinate classes a mechanical fact of little or no interest. At best, what is noted is the "decay" and the "distortion" experienced by those ideas or beliefs in the course of their transmission. But the diffidence of historians has another,

more understandable, reason of a methodological rather than an ideological order. In contrast to anthropologists and students of popular traditions, historians obviously begin at a great disadvantage. Even today the culture of the subordinate class is largely *oral*, and it was even more so in centuries past. Since historians are unable to converse with the peasants of the sixteenth century (and, in any case, there is no guarantee that they would understand them), they must depend almost entirely on written sources (and possibly archeological evidence). These are doubly indirect for they are *written*, and written in general by individuals who were more or less openly attached to the dominant culture. This means that the thoughts, the beliefs, and the aspirations of the peasants and artisans of the past reach us (if and when they do) almost always through distorting viewpoints and intermediaries. At the very outset this is enough to discourage attempts at such research.


But the terms of the problem are drastically altered when we propose to study, not "culture *produced* by the popular classes," but rather "culture *imposed* on the popular classes." This is what Robert Mandrou attempted to do more than a decade ago on the basis of sources that had been exploited only slightly up to that time: the literature of *colportage*, those inexpensive, crudely printed booklets, (almanacs, songsters, recipes, tales of miracles or saints' lives), which were sold at fairs or in the countryside by itinerant vendors. An inventory of the principal recurring themes led Mandrou to formulate a somewhat hasty conclusion. He defined this literature as "escapist," suggesting that it had nourished for centuries a view of the world permeated by fatalism and determinism, the miraculous and the occult, thereby preventing those whom it affected from becoming aware of their own social and political conditions, and playing, perhaps intentionally, a reactionary role.

Mandrou did not limit himself to the evaluation of almanacs and songsters as documents of a literature deliberately intended for the masses. With a hasty and unjustified transition he defined them as instruments of a victorious process of acculturation, "the reflection . . . of the world view" of the popular classes of the *Ancien Régime*, tacitly attributing complete cultural passivity to the latter and giving a disproportionately large influence to the literature of *colportage*. The peasants who were able to read, in a society that was three-quarters illiterate, were certainly a very small minority. Even if press runs were apparently very high and each one of those booklets was probably read aloud, thus reaching large segments of the illiterate population, it is absurd to equate "the culture produced by the popular classes" with "the culture imposed on the masses," and to identify the features of popular culture exclusively by means of the maxims, the precepts, and the fables of the *Bibliothèque*

*bleue*. The shortcut taken by Mandrou to circumvent the difficulties inherent in the reconstruction of an oral culture actually only takes us back to the starting point.

A similar shortcut (but starting with a very different set of presuppositions) was used with notable naiveté by Geneviève Bollème. In the literature of *colportage* this scholar has seen, instead of Mandrou's instrument of an (improbable) victorious acculturation, the spontaneous expression (which is even more improbable) of an original and autonomous popular culture permeated by religious values. In this popular religion based on Christ's humanity and poverty, the natural and the supernatural, fear of death and the drive for life, endurance of injustice and revolt against oppression were seen as being harmoniously fused. With this method we substitute for "popular literature" a "literature destined for the people" and thus remain, without realizing it, in the sphere of a culture produced by the dominant classes. It is true that Bollème suggested incidentally the existence of a gap between the pamphlet literature and the way in which it was in all probability read by the popular classes. But even this valuable idea remains unfruitful since it leads to the postulate of a "popular creativity," which can't be defined and is apparently unattainable, having been part of a vanished oral tradition.


4

 The stereotyped and saccharine image of popular culture that results from this research is very different from what is outlined by Mikhail Bakhtin in a lively and fundamental book on the relations between Rabelais and the popular culture of his day. Here it is suggested that *Gargantua* or *Pantagruel*, books that perhaps no peasant ever read, teach us more about peasant culture than the *Almanach des bergers*, which must have circulated widely in the French countryside. The center of the culture portrayed by Bakhtin is the carnival: myth and ritual in which converge the celebration of fertility and abundance, the jesting inversion of all values and established orders, the cosmic sense of the destructive and regenerative passing of time. According to Bakhtin, this vision of the world, which had evolved through popular culture over the course of centuries, was in marked contrast to the dogmatism and conservatism of the culture of the dominant classes, especially in the Middle Ages. By keeping this disparity in mind, the work of Rabelais becomes comprehensible, its comic quality linked directly to the carnival themes of

popular culture: cultural dichotomy, then—but also a circular, reciprocal influence between the cultures of subordinate and ruling classes that was especially intense in the first half of the sixteenth century.

These are hypotheses to a certain extent, and not all of them equally well documented. But the principal failing in Bakhtin's fine book is probably something else. The protagonists of popular culture whom he has tried to describe, the peasants and the artisans, speak to us almost exclusively through the words of Rabelais. The very wealth of research possibilities indicated by Bakhtin makes us wish for a direct study of lower-class society free of intermediaries. But for reasons already mentioned, it is extremely difficult in this area of scholarship to find a direct rather than an indirect method of approach.

5

 Certainly there is no need to exaggerate when we talk about distortions. The fact that a source is not "objective" (for that matter, neither is an inventory) does not mean that it is useless. A hostile chronicle can furnish precious testimony about a peasant community in revolt. The analysis of the "carnival at Romans" by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie is outstanding in this sense. And, on the whole, in comparison with the methodological uncertainty and the poor results of the majority of studies devoted explicitly to the definition of popular culture in preindustrial Europe, the research of Natalie Zemon Davis and Edward P. Thompson on the "Charivari," which throws light on particular aspects of that culture, is of an exceptionally high level. In short, even meager, scattered, and obscure documentation can be put to good use.

But the fear of falling into a notorious, naive positivism, combined with the exasperated awareness of the ideological distortion that may lurk behind the most normal and seemingly innocent process of perception, prompts many historians today to discard popular culture together with the sources that provide a more or less distorted picture of it. After having criticized (and not without reason) the studies mentioned above on the literature of *colportage*, a number of scholars have begun to ask themselves whether "popular culture exists outside the act that suppresses it." The question is rhetorical, and the reply is obviously negative. This type of skepticism seems paradoxical at first glance since behind it stand the studies of Michel Foucault, the scholar who, with his *Histoire de la folie*, has most authoritatively drawn attention to the exclusions, prohibitions, and

limits through which our culture came into being historically. But on second glance, it is a paradox only in appearance. What interests Foucault primarily are the act and the criteria of the exclusion, the excluded a little less so. The attitude that led him to write *Les mots et les choses* and *L'archéologie du savoir* was already at least partly implicit in the *Histoire de la folie*, probably stimulated by Jacques Derrida's facile, nihilistic objections to the *Histoire*. Derrida contended that it is not possible to speak of madness in a language historically grounded in western reason and hence in the process that has led to the repression of madness itself. Basically, he maintained that the Archimidean point from which Foucault embarked on his research neither can nor does exist. At this point Foucault's ambitious project of an *archéologie du silence* becomes transformed into silence pure and simple—perhaps accompanied by mute contemplation of an aesthetic kind.

Evidence of this regression can be found in a recent volume containing essays by Foucault and some of his associates plus various documents concerned with the early-nineteenth-century case of a young peasant who killed his mother, his sister, and a brother. The analysis is based principally on the interaction of two languages of exclusion, the judicial and the psychiatric, which tend to cancel each other out. The person of the assassin, Pierre Rivière, is relegated to secondary importance—and precisely at the time when the testimony he had written at the request of his judges to explain how he had come to commit the triple murder is finally being published. The possibility of interpreting this text is specifically ruled out because it is held to be impossible to do so without distortion or without subjecting it to an extraneous system of reasoning. The only legitimate reactions that remain are "astonishment" and "silence."

Irrationalism of an aesthetic nature is what emerges from this course of research. The obscure and contradictory relationship of Pierre Rivière with the dominant culture is barely mentioned: his reading (almanacs, books of piety, but also *Le bon sens du curé Meslier*) is simply ignored. Instead he is described wandering in the forest after the crime, as "a man without culture . . . an animal without instinct . . . a mythical being, a monster whom it is impossible to define because he is outside any recognizable order." We are dazzled by an absolute extraneousness that, in reality, results from the refusal to analyze and interpret. The only discourse that constitutes a radical alternative to the lies of constituted society is represented by these victims of social exclusion—a discourse that passes over the crime and the cannibalism and becomes embodied indifferently either in the memoir written by Rivière or in his matricide. It is a populism with its symbols reversed. A "black" populism—but

Enough has been said to demonstrate the confusion in the concept of "popular culture." First there is attributed to the subordinate classes of preindustrial society a passive accommodation to the cultural sub-products proffered by the dominant classes (Mandrou), then an implied suggestion of at least partly autonomous values in respect to the culture of the latter (Bollème), and finally an absolute extraneousness that places the subordinate class actually beyond or, better yet, in a state prior to culture (Foucault). To be sure, Bakhtin's hypothesis of a reciprocal influence between lower class and dominant cultures is much more fruitful. But to specify the methods and the periods of this influence (Jacques Le Goff has begun to do so with excellent results) means running into the problem caused by a documentation, which, in the case of popular culture, is almost always indirect. To what extent are the possible elements of the dominant culture found in popular culture the result of a more or less deliberate acculturation, or of a more or less spontaneous convergence, rather than of an unconscious distortion of the source, inclined obviously to lead what is unknown back to the known and the familiar?

I faced a similar problem years ago in the midst of research on witchcraft trials of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. I wanted to understand what witchcraft really meant to its protagonists, the witches and sorcerers. But the available documentation (trials and especially treatises of demonology) served only as a barrier, hopelessly preventing a true grasp of popular witchcraft. Everywhere I ran up against inquisitorial concepts of witchcraft derived from sources of learned origin. Only the discovery of a current of previously ignored beliefs connected with the *benandanti* opened a breach in that wall. A deeply-rooted stratum of basically autonomous popular beliefs began to emerge by way of the discrepancies between the questions of the judges and the replies of the accused—discrepancies unattributable to either suggestive questioning or to torture.

The disclosures made by Menocchio, the miller of the Friuli who is the protagonist of this book, in some ways constitute a case similar to that of the *benandanti*. Here, too, the fact that many of Menocchio's utterances cannot be reduced to familiar themes permits us to perceive a previously untapped level of popular beliefs, of obscure peasant mythologies. But what renders Menocchio's case that much more complicated is the fact that these obscure popular elements are grafted onto an extremely clear and logical complex of ideas, from religious radicalism, to a naturalism

astonishing convergence between the ideas of an unknown miller of the Friuli and those of the most refined and informed intellectual groups of his day forcefully raises the question of cultural diffusion formulated by Bakhtin.

7

❖ Before examining the degree to which Menocchio's confessions assist us in understanding this problem, it is only proper to ask what relevance the ideas and beliefs of a single individual of his social level can have. At a time when virtual teams of scholars have embarked on vast projects in the *quantitative* history of ideas or *serialized* religious history, to undertake a narrow investigation on a solitary miller may seem paradoxical or absurd, practically a return to handweaving in an age of power looms. It is significant that the very possibility of research of this kind has been ruled out *a priori* by those who, like François Furet, have maintained that the reintegration of the subordinate classes into general history can only be accomplished through "number and anonymity," by means of demography and sociology, "the quantitative study of past societies." Although the lower classes are no longer ignored by historians, they seem condemned, nevertheless, to remain "silent."

But if the sources offer us the possibility of reconstructing not only indistinct masses but also individual personalities, it would be absurd to ignore it. To extend the historic concept of "individual" in the direction of the lower classes is a worthwhile objective. Certainly, there is the risk of succumbing to the anecdote, to the notorious *Histoire événementielle* (which is not only, nor necessarily, political history). But it is not an inevitable risk. A number of biographical studies have shown that in a modest individual who is himself lacking in significance and for this very reason representative, it is still possible to trace, as in a microcosm, the characteristics of an entire social stratum in a specific historical period, whether it be the Austrian nobility or the lower clergy in seventeenth-century England.

Is this, then, also the case with Menocchio? Not in the least. He cannot be considered a "typical" peasant (in the sense of "average," or "in the statistical majority") of his age: this is clear from his relative isolation in the town. In the eyes of his fellows, Menocchio was a man somewhat different from others. But this distinctiveness had very definite limits. As

with language, culture offers to the individual a horizon of latent possibilities—a flexible and invisible cage in which he can exercise his own conditional liberty. With rare clarity and understanding, Menocchio articulated the language that history put at his disposal. Thus, it becomes possible to trace in his disclosures in a particularly distinct, almost exaggerated form, a series of convergent elements, which, in a similar group of sources that are contemporary or slightly later, appear lost or are barely mentioned. A few soundings confirm the existence of traits reduceable to a common peasant culture. In conclusion, even a limited case (and Menocchio certainly is this) can be representative: in a negative sense, because it helps to explain what should be understood, in a given situation, as being "in the statistical majority"; or, positively, because it permits us to define the latent possibilities of something (popular culture) otherwise known to us only through fragmentary and distorted documents, almost all of which originate in the "archives of the repression."

With this, it is not my intention to pass judgment on qualitative versus quantitative research; quite simply, it must be emphasized that, as far as the history of the subordinate classes is concerned, the precision of the latter cannot do without (cannot *yet* do without, that is) the notorious impressionism of the former. E. P. Thompson's telling remark about "the gross reiterative impressionism of a computer, which repeats one conformity *ad nauseam* while obliterating all evidence for which it has not been programmed" is literally true in the sense that the computer, obviously, executes but does not think. On the other hand, only a series of specific in-depth investigations may permit the development of an articulate program to submit to the computer.

Let us take a concrete example. In recent years several quantitative studies have been made on the production and diffusion of French books in the eighteenth century. This research grew out of the legitimate desire to broaden the traditional framework of the history of ideas through a census of a vast array of titles (almost forty-five thousand), which previously had been systematically ignored by scholars. Only in this way, it was said, would it be possible to weigh the incidence of the inert and static element in the book trade and at the same time grasp the significance of a breakthrough in the truly innovative works. An Italian scholar, Furio Diaz, has objected that, on the one hand, this approach almost always succeeds only in laboriously discovering the obvious; on the other, it risks dwelling upon what is historically misleading, and he underscored this with the following example. Late-eighteenth-century French peasants certainly did not assault the castles of the nobility because they had read *L'Ange conducteur*. They did so because "the new ideas that were spreading among them were not the result of a direct assault on the castles of the nobility, but of a gradual process of diffusion through the towns and the countryside."

coincided with "interests and . . . old animosities." Clearly, this second objection (the other is more solidly founded) denies the very existence of a popular culture as well as the usefulness of research on the ideas and beliefs of the subordinate classes, thereby reinforcing the older history of ideas of an exclusively hierarchical type. Actually, the criticism that should be directed to the quantitative history of ideas is quite another: namely, not that it is too little hierarchically inclined, but rather, too much. It starts from the premise that not just the texts alone but even the titles themselves furnish unequivocal data. Instead, this is probably less and less the case the lower the social level of the readers. The almanacs, the songsters, the books of piety, the lives of the saints, the entire pamphlet literature that constituted the bulk of the book trade, today appear static, inert, and unchanging to us. But how were they read by the public of the day? To what extent did the prevalently oral culture of those readers interject itself in the use of the text, modifying it, reworking it, perhaps to the point of changing its very essence? Menocchio's accounts of his readings provide us with a striking example of a relationship to the text that is totally different from that of today's educated reader. They permit us to measure, at last, the discrepancy that Bollème quite properly suggested existed between the texts of "popular" literature and the light in which they appeared to peasants and artisans. In Menocchio's case the discrepancy seems to be extremely profound and probably uncommon. But again, it is precisely this peculiarity that furnishes precious indications for future research. As far as the quantitative history of ideas is concerned, only knowledge of the historical and social variability of the person of the reader will really lay the foundations for a history of ideas that is also *qualitatively* different.

❖ The gulf between the texts read by Menocchio and the way in which he understood them and reported them to the inquisitors indicates that his ideas cannot be reduced or traced back to any particular book. On the one hand, they are derived from a seemingly ancient oral tradition. On the other, they recall a series of motifs worked out by humanistically educated heretical groups: tolerance, tendential reduction of religion to morality, and so forth. This is a dichotomy in appearance only. In reality it reflects a unified culture within which it is impossible to make clear-cut

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with educated circles, his statements in favor of religious tolerance and his desire for a radical renewal of society have an original stamp to them and do not appear to be the results of passively received outside influences. The roots of his utterances and of his aspirations were sunk in an obscure, almost unfathomable, layer of remote peasant traditions.

Here we could ask ourselves if what emerges from Menocchio's speeches is not a "mentality" rather than a "culture." Appearances to the contrary, this is not an idle distinction. That which has characterized studies of the history of mentalities has been their insistence on the inert, obscure, unconscious elements in a given world view. Survivals, archaisms, the emotional, the irrational: all these are included in the specific field of the history of mentalities, setting it off from such related and established disciplines as the history of ideas or the history of culture (which, however, for some scholars encompasses both of the preceding). To discuss Menocchio's case only within the limits of the history of mentalities would mean downgrading the strong rational element (which is not necessarily identifiable with our own rationality) in his vision of the world. But an even more crucial argument against following the methods of the history of mentalities is its decidedly classless character. It probes what there is in common between "Caesar and the least of his legionnaires, Saint Louis and the peasant who tilled his fields, Christopher Columbus and one of his mariners." In this sense the adjective "collective" added to "mentality" is in most cases redundant. One should not deny the legitimacy of this kind of research, but the risk of reaching unwarranted conclusions with it is very real. Even Lucien Febvre, one of the greatest historians of this century, fell into a trap of this sort. In a fascinating but mistaken book he attempted to distinguish the mental coordinates of an entire age on the basis of studying a single individual, albeit a very exceptional one—Rabelais. There is no problem as long as Febvre limits himself to the question of demonstrating the nonexistence of Rabelais's supposed "atheism." But the argument becomes unacceptable when Febvre turns to "collective mentality (or psychology)" and to the insistence that religion exercised an influence on "sixteenth-century men" that was both restrictive and oppressive and also inescapable, as it was for Rabelais. Who, in fact, were these poorly identified "sixteenth-century men"? Were they humanists, merchants, artisans, peasants? Because of this notion of a classless "collective mentality," the results of research on a narrow stratum of French society composed of cultivated individuals are extended by implication, with no one excepted, to encompass an entire century. There is a return to the traditional history of ideas in this theorizing about collective mentalities. The peasants, the overwhelming majority of the population of the time, have been

Febvre's book to be hastily dispatched as a "mass . . . half savage, a prey to superstitions"; while the statement that it was not possible in that age to formulate a critically coherent irreligious position leads to the obvious. The seventeenth century was not the sixteenth and Descartes was not Rabelais's contemporary.

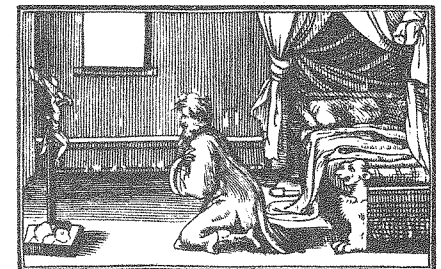
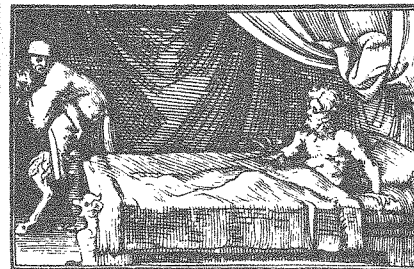
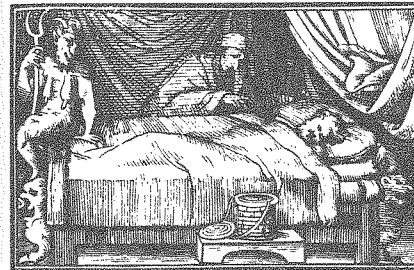
Despite these limitations, the manner in which Febvre succeeded in identifying the complex of motifs that connect an individual to an historically determinate environment and society is exemplary. The methods he used in examining the religion of Rabelais can also serve to analyze the quite different religion of Menocchio. Nevertheless, it should be clear at this point why the term "popular culture," which is unsatisfactory in some cases, is preferable to "collective mentality." A concept of class structure, even if conceived in general terms, is still a big advance over classlessness.

This is not to assert the existence of a homogeneous culture common to both peasants and urban artisans (not to mention such marginal groups as vagabonds) in preindustrial Europe. The intention here is simply to suggest an area of research within which specific analyses similar to the present one will have to be conducted. Only in this way will it be possible in the future to build on the conclusions reached in the present study.

9

✠ A case such as Menocchio's was made possible by two great historical events: the invention of printing and the Reformation. Printing enabled him to confront books with the oral tradition in which he had grown up and fed him the words to release that tangle of ideas and fantasies he had within him. The Reformation gave him the courage to express his feelings to the parish priest, to his fellow villagers, to the inquisitors—even if he could not, as he wished, say them in person to the pope, to cardinals, and princes. The enormous rupture resulting from the end of the monopoly on written culture by the educated and on religion by the clergy had created a new and potentially explosive situation. But the possibility of finding a common ground between the aspirations of a segment of upper-class culture and those of popular culture had already been definitively crushed more than a half century before Menocchio's trial when Luther scathingly condemned the Peasants' War and the claims that underlay it. By Menocchio's time only a very small minority among the persecuted, such as the Anabaptists, continued to be inspired by that

ideal. With the Counter-Reformation (and simultaneously with the consolidation of the Protestant churches) an age opened marked by the increasing rigidity of authority, the paternalistic indoctrination of the masses, and the extinction of popular culture by the more or less violent shunting aside of minorities and dissident groups. And even Menocchio finished at the stake.



10

✠ We have said that it is impossible to make clear-cut distinctions within Menocchio's cultural world. Only hindsight permits us to isolate those themes, already beginning to coincide with motifs shared by



a segment of the upper levels of sixteenth-century culture, which became the patrimony of the "progressive" circles of later centuries: aspirations for a radical reform of society, the eating away at religion from within, tolerance. Menocchio falls within a fine, tortuous, but clearly distinguishable, line of development that can be followed directly to the present. In a sense he is one of our forerunners. But Menocchio is also a dispersed fragment, reaching us by chance, of an obscure shadowy world that can be reconnected to our own history only by an arbitrary act. That culture has been destroyed. To respect its residue of unintelligibility that resists any attempt at analysis does not mean succumbing to a foolish fascination for the exotic and incomprehensible. It is simply taking note of a historical mutilation of which, in a certain sense, we ourselves are the victims. "Nothing that has taken place should be lost to history," wrote Walter Benjamin. "But only to redeemed humanity does the past belong in its entirety." Redeemed and thus liberated.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



An earlier version of this book was first discussed in a seminar on popular religion held in the fall of 1973 at the Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University and later in a seminar directed by the author at the University of Bologna. I am deeply grateful to Lawrence Stone, director of the Davis Center, and to all those who have helped me to improve this work with their criticisms and suggestions: especially, Piero Camporesi, Jay Dolan, John Elliott, Felix Gilbert, Robert Muchembled, Ottavia Niccoli, Jim Obelkevich, Adriano Prosperi, Lionel Rothkrug, Jerry Seigel, Eileen Yeo, Stephen Yeo, and my students in Bologna. I should also like to thank don Guglielmo Biasutti, librarian of the Archiepiscopal Curia of Udine; Aldo Colonnello; Angelo Marin, secretary of the town of Montereale Valcellina, and the staffs of the archives and libraries mentioned below. Other debts are acknowledged in the course of the book.