“They Tore God Limb from Limb”: Marginalized Dissenters in Normative Religious Discourse

Abstract:

This paper interacts with two texts, that is Michel De Certeau's *The Possession at Loudun* and Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. Both of these texts present a narrative of religious turmoil, demonic possessions and the Inquisition's pursuit of a heretic, respectively– and the events surrounding individual religious dissenters, namely the French priest Urbain Grandier and the Italian miller known as Menocchio. Comparing the two heretical men presented in these texts allows for an understanding of Catholic Church dogma during the age of the Counter-Reformation, as well as how the institution managed threats, both external and internal. Moreover, this paper also examines the methodologies behind the historical discourse, in order to understand the validity of the narratives presented, and the scope of their historical depth. Addressing methodology is crucial when one's focus is narrowed to two individual case studies by two different historians. Thus, this paper intends to illustrate the threats to normative religious discourse which Urbain Grandier and Menocchio possessed in the face of the Catholic Church, while also demonstrating the methodologies by which the two men are presented within their respective histories.

"For many, the most dangerous are the so-called *men of virtue,* in reality *worse than the devils.*"[1] The Protestant Reformation, brought forth by these some "virtuous" men, tore God limb from limb and destabilized the Catholic Church, shaking its foundations to the core.[2] Two separate men embodied this radical ideology in their seemingly dissident beliefs. Urbain Grandier, a parish priest of Loudun, France in the 1630's and Domenico Scandella (or Menocchio), a resident of Montereale, Italy in the latter half of the sixteenth century, exemplified religious objection in an age of intense Counter-Reformation sentiment. Their dissent from the normative religious discourse of the Catholic Church, led directly to their respective downfalls. Their stories are told by two historians, Michel De Certeau and Carlo Ginzburg, who employ distinct historiographical methodologies. Urbain Grandier and Menocchio were marginalized religious dissenters who, for voicing their beliefs, were eliminated by the collective. Yet, both individuals served specific purposes within the normative religious discourse of their time – that is, the Counter Reformation and have been methodologically preserved in fundamentally divergent fashions.

Loudun during the early seventeenth century was a city steeped in religious turmoil. Protestantism swept across Europe during the seventeenth century, and the provincial French city of Loudun was no exception; it that had been dominated by French Catholics since the days of Pepin and Charlemagne, but was now increasingly invaded by Huguenots.[3] The Huguenots' presence was a direct threat to the stability of Catholicism. In the Catholic perspective, the Protestants would, in due course, infiltrate every aspect of Loudunais life and turn the citizenry to the devil. Ironically, "demons" entered Loudun of their own accord in the fall of 1632,

[1] Michel De Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1970, 101.
[2] Ibid., 13.
[3] Ibid., 24.

infecting a convent of 'pure' Ursuline nuns.[4] It is within this tumultuous environment that we place Urbain Grandier, a local parish priest. Urbain Grandier was already considered a troublemaker by Catholic officials in Loudon, prior to the satanic infiltration he allegedly incited. Grandier was a handsome young man, whose charisma attracted many Loudunais women.[5] He was said to "seduce his public" during orations and sermons, a versatile and potentially dangerous quality for a priest.[6] Regardless of these appealing characteristics, Grandier possessed an argumentative nature, which repeatedly caused disturbances within the Church. He was charged on multiple occasions for upsetting normative practice and subscribing to disconcerting morals.[7] He reveled in his self-defence, playing into the theatrical nature of the proceedings, and in each instance was found not guilty.[8] In his arrest prior to the demonic possessions, he was specifically found "not guilty, for the present," a clear and indicative warning to quell any further opposition.[9]

In addition to Grandier's disagreeable nature, he threatened the Church from within, an unforgivable criminal offense. Grandier wrote a *Treatise on Celibacy*, an ecclesiastical defense against the celibacy of priests. In his own words, Grandier described the treatise as follows: the "Treatise on Celibacy, by which it is proven that an ecclesiastic can marry, by clear and obvious reason and authorities that will be deduced succinctly and nakedly, without literary ornament, in order that the truth, appearing stripped bare and without make-up, may be better received."[10] Certeau calls it a "theological discourse [in the] language of love."[11] Grandier's literature was in

[4] Ibid., 13.
[5] Ibid., 53.
[6] Ibid., 54.
[7] Ibid., 55-56.
[8] Ibid., 56.
[9] Ibid., 58.
[10] Ibid., 59.
[11] Ibid.

clear violation of normative Catholic dogma. Possessing such thoughts, let alone a pamphlet dedicated to the idea, would have been considered a profound act of heresy. Furthermore, in clear dissent of the religion in which he participated, Grandier fell in love with and engaged in sexual relations with a woman.[12] It was for her, that he wrote his *Treatise*.[13] With his writing, Grandier sundered the very foundations of the priesthood, and the true meaning of dedicating oneself to God. In the eyes of the Catholic Church, he tore God limb from limb.

The spate of "demonic" possessions in Loudun in the fall of 1632 set Grandier on the path to his own destruction. Beginning in September, a phantom appeared ominously at the end of dark convent hallways and crept to the edges of Ursuline nuns' beds, an apparent manifestation of sexual fantasies –fantasies, it should be noted, that were said to be brought on by the devil's influence, allowing the nuns to maintain their innocence.[14] Paradoxically, however, Grandier, who was free from the devil's authority, was forbidden from his own sexual fantasies–that is to serve the Church while also being allowed to engage in sexual and marital relations–due to their heretical nature. Several days after the first sighting, the "phantom" abandoned his anonymity, revealing himself to be Urbain Grandier. Thus, the stage was set against him as soon as the first "phantom" appeared. Catholic officials from Loudun and Paris assembled a case against Grandier, drawing correlations between his past transgressions against the Church and the diabolical acts being committed within the town of Loudun, which was wide-sweeping possessions of the Ursuline nuns. By October 11th, Ursuline Sister Claire pointedly aided the case, stating during an exorcism that, "a priest put me here, a priest will not dislodge

[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 13.

me."[15] In a dramatic flurry of events, Grandier was immediately arrested and his residence searched. His *Treatise* was discovered, and his position as a Protestant heretic was secured.[16] His condemnation followed an intensive investigation into his illicit activities; a trial began the following July, drawing national attention.[17] Grandier's case was critical for the Catholic Church, as their management of the demonic crisis had the potential to cement or diminish the authority of the Church within Loudun, as well as convert Huguenots back to the true religion. This atmosphere of Catholic fanaticism had, in fact, been helpful for the Counter-Reformation, as the trial, as well as Grandier himself, showcased Protestant ideals which were appropriately crushed with the might of the Catholic Church, consequently propagating a Counter-Reformation narrative. Needless to say, Grandier was charged with sorcery, among other heresies, and was burned at the stake on August 18th, 1634, almost two years from his first appearance as an apparition in the Ursuline convent.[18]

Grandier's death served the Counter-Reformation by giving authority to the narrative of demonic possessions, and thus, the Catholic solution of exorcism. Over the course of Grandier's priestly life, his repeated quarrels with the Church positioned authority figures against him and aptly demonstrated his threat to Catholic stability. His death, in theory, would cure the Ursuline nuns of their satanic illness and serve to validate the possessions themselves. Unfortunately for the Catholic Church, the possessions endured for another three years, until the final exorcism of the prioress Jeanne des Anges, which occurred on October 15th, 1637.[19] This, however, was of little consequence to Catholic officials, who thrived on religious fanaticism.[20] With the demons

[15] Ibid., 19.
[16] Ibid., 76.
[17] Ibid., 152.
[18] Ibid., 175.
[19] Ibid., 216.
[20] Ibid., 150.

evacuated, the Church transitioned to creating theatrical propaganda in the re-telling of events from Loudun in a nationwide tour led by Jeanne De Anges, who was the recipient of two miracles. Grandier's death propagated religious normative discourse, by demonstrating that the solution to the demonic problem, as well as heresy itself was, simply, a return to the traditions and practices of the Catholic Church, thus strengthening the Counter-Reformation.

If we turn now to observe Menocchio in Montereale, we can once again recognize the persecution of the individual by the collective within the aim of quelling dissent in the name of Counter-Reformation ideals. Menocchio was a self-proclaimed 'poor' miller, who rented two mills on perpetual lease.[21] However, Menocchio does appear financially stable, as he was able to give his daughter a dowry and did not give the impression of a man in debt.[22] Additionally, Menocchio had access to the literature of his time; both by buying books himself, and through connections with educated individuals who lent them to him.[23] His book list was expansive, from an unidentified version of the Bible to texts regarding the Virgin Mary and chronicles of religious adventures.[24] Menocchio's access to literature was significant, as the peasant class typically did not possess the skill to read, let alone understand complicated religious literature. These texts became the foundation on which Menocchio constructed the heretical beliefs, which would ultimately lead to his death.

Menocchio was first brought before the Inquisition for his heretical ideas on September 28th, 1583.[25] The Inquisition was concerned with Menocchio's knowledge of certain texts and the

[21] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), 1.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 29
[24] Ibid., 27-28.
[25] Ibid., 15.

dangerous conclusions he had drawn from them, as a peasant was rarely as educated as Menocchio appeared to be. The ideals which Menocchio drew from the texts were radical for the late sixteenth century, and some presented themselves as inherently Lutheran in nature. The Protestant ideals embodied in Menocchio's theology were considered innately heretical, and therefore were of great concern to the Catholic Church. The single most critically objectionable theory proposed by Menocchio was his assertion that there existed no true religion. This was a complete rejection of Catholic ideology, which professes to be the *only* true religion. Menocchio stated, however, that "likewise, God the father has various children whom he loves, such as Christians, Turks, and Jews, and to each of them he has given the will to live by his own law, and we do not know which is the right one."[26] He furthered his argument by citing that because he was born a Christian, he wanted to remain so. Similarly, if he had been born a Turk, he would want to remain a Turk.[27] This defied the Christian dogma of conversion altogether, for if God loved all religions, and each had the prospect of being correct, the theory of conversion would be rendered inconsequential. For lay-people, unlike Menocchio, who were immersed solely in normative religious discourse, the faith they were born into became preeminent, due to the hereditary nature of religion in the sixteenth century.[28] Additionally, Menocchio questioned the nature of God Himself and His role within the cosmos.[29] He asked of the Inquisitors, "this divine intellect in the beginning had knowledge of all things: where did he acquire this information, was it from his own essence or by another way?"[30] Menocchio actively engaged the Catholic Inquisition in theological debate, further digging his own grave in the process. He accused God

[26] Ibid., 47.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Ibid., 52-53.
[30] Ibid., 52.

of being "nothing but air" in the face of the religious authority, which held the reins of power.[31] Menocchio's bold and "heretical" nature directly led to his persecution by the Catholic Inquisition under Counter-Reformation mandate, which sought to eliminate dissent entirely in order to prevent the spread of Protestantism.

Menocchio's ideologies did not originate from the Protestant Reformation, despite the similarities between them. Carlo Ginzburg asserts that the Protestant Reformation did not form Menocchio's ideology, as both Catholic and Protestant ideals feature in Menocchio's hypotheses. For example, Menocchio approved of the selling of indulgences, the very policy which triggered Martin Luther's crusade against the Catholic Church.[32] Yet, in contradiction, he also stated that the "'law and commandments of the church' seemed to be 'all a business' designed to enrich priests."[33] As such, he appeared to both accept and reject a central dogma of sixteenth century Catholicism. However, he refused to surrender himself entirely to Lutheranism, and sought to remain in Montereale, rather than committing to moving to Geneva.[34] Regardless of the Protestant Reformation's influence on Menocchio, the Counter-Reformation also greatly influenced his persecution. Catholic fundamentalism demanded the conversion of individuals back to the Catholic faith– if not their outright elimination– in order to prevent threats to the stability of the Church. This policy justified the Church's lengthy inquisitions of Menocchio, which critically examined his fundamental theological beliefs. The first inquisition led to his imprisonment for several years, while the latter resulted in his demise at the stake. Therefore, the

[31] Ibid., 97.
[32] Ibid., 72.
[33] Ibid., 75.
[34] Ibid., 96.

Protestant Reformation may not have influenced Menocchio, but the Counter-Reformation undeniably influenced his persecutors.

Menocchio's death in 1599 served a similar purpose for the Catholic Church as Grandier's would thirty-five years later. Menocchio may not have been an agent of the Church, he still posed a threat to its internal stability. His death enhanced Counter-Reformation sentiment, as his heretical ideologies were decimated in favour of the righteousness of the Catholic Church. If Ginzburg's theory regarding Menocchio as the embodiment of popular culture, is to be believed, his death was exemplary for the citizens of Montereale and served as a warning for those seeking to educate themselves for the purposes of heresy. This in turn solidified the authority of the Church, and thus normative religious discourse within Montereale, over the heretics of the peasant class. Menocchio's cosmos of the cheese and the worms tore God limb from limb.

Addressing the avenues by which Urbain Grandier and Menocchio are presented is critical to understanding their histories. Methodology is the tool by which a historian may access the traces of the past, the whispered voices of the dead, long since gone. Michel De Certeau presents his history of the possessions of Loudun, which is reflective of the sensational events of 1632-37. In Certeau's words, "*histoire* becomes dramatized."[35] His methodology foundationally and functionally contains a performative aspect, which enhances his analysis of the theatrical events of the demonic possessions. Moreover, within the original French text, Certeau presents his primary sources in italics, a format comparable to stage directions contained within a script. This feature contributes to the dramatic atmosphere of the study. Additionally, Certeau illustrates

[35] Certeau, 22.

several instances of 'collectives': a collective of possessed nuns, a collective of Catholic liberators and exorcists, a collective of marginalized Protestant ideals embodied by a singular man, Grandier– and then juxtaposes this individual man against the various ensembles which will bring about his doom. The scapegoat is depicted amid the swirling sea of opinions which will eventually drown him, reproduced faithfully and in totality by Certeau to allow the reader to choose their own justification for his condemnation. Certeau's theatrical methodology within *The Possession at Loudun* allows him to illustrate the historical events appropriately and comprehensively

Carlo Ginzburg's methodology is distinctly separate from Certeau's, albeit less comprehensive. This divergence stems, in part, from the very nature of his argument, that is, the presentation of Menocchio's theories as representative of popular oral culture. Ginzburg asserts that, "we could ask ourselves if what emerges from Menocchio's speeches is not a 'mentality' rather than a 'culture.'"[36] This imposes an air of impossibility on his central thesis, as culture itself is variable, and oral culture can evaporate the moment words leave the mouth, leaving no trace upon written historical narrative. As such, Ginzburg's methodology is inherently flawed due to the paradoxical relationship between his claims and reality. As well, his scope, and therefore methodology, is restricted to two trial documents from which he seeks to spin a broader narrative of the past. The utilization of these documents is expansive within themselves, but limited within historical context. As well, Ginzburg does not delve into theatrical analysis as Certeau does, despite the dramatic elements of Menocchio's trial. Instead, Ginzburg elects for a purely analytical approach to the formation of Menocchio's ideology, and how it can embody oral culture. As such, Ginzburg's methodology contains defects. These faults, however, do not

[36] Ginzburg, xxx.

hinder his critical engagement with a peculiar individual persecuted in a nondescript Italian town during the age of the Counter-Reformation.

Urbain Grandier and Menocchio were two individuals persecuted for their Protestant-like beliefs during the age of the Counter-Reformation. Both individuals were pursued by the Catholic Church, due to their dissent from and rejection of fundamental Catholic dogma. As such, their deaths assisted normative religious discourse by reasserting the authority of the Catholic Church in an era of religious fundamentalism, serving to quell further growth of Protestantism. However dissimilar, Certeau's and Ginzburg's methodologies both bring to life the singular narratives of these men long deceased in order to illustrate their conflict with the Catholic Church, that is, normative religious discourse. Grandier and Menocchio tore God limb from limb in pursuit of heretical theology, which, consequently, resulted in their demise at the hands of the Catholic Church.

Bibliography

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