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## MENOCCHIO'S BOOKS

by [John H. Lienhard](#)

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Today, a simple man is swept away by the printing revolution. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

Historian Carlo Ginzburg tells of a miller born in 1532. He was Menocchio, a friendly, loquacious fellow, always shooting off his mouth. He could read. Printing presses were just a century old. And Menocchio knew those new books held wonderful secrets.

So he read and he talked. He spent his precious money on even more precious books. He swapped books with literate friends in nearby towns. Yet the words made only patchwork sense to him.

Still, those bits and pieces of learning obsessed Menocchio. He collared friends on the street. He harangued them about the Trinity, the Virgin Birth, and cosmic origins.

Finally, of course, the Italian Inquisition haled him into court. "Keep your mouth shut," his family told him. Menocchio tried but could not. He faced a panel of real scholars who were ready to listen. He faced a notary who would write down every word. It was a dream fulfilled. Menocchio talked -- and talked.

His theology violated all orthodoxy. It contradicted itself. It was earthy and filled with rich metaphors. He'd created a cosmology of putrefaction. The heavens, he said, formed when the vast primordial chaos curdled into planets and stars -- the way cheese curdles out of cream. Angels came into being in this ferment -- the way worms appear in rotting cheese.

Now as telescopes reach the far fringe of the universe, that sounds less silly. For there we can see stars curdling out of the chaos of 15 billion years ago, just as Menocchio imagined.

As Menocchio talks, we hear random echoes from all the great forbidden books of his age -- the Vulgate Bible, the Decameron, the Koran. He's angry at the Church for controlling all that knowledge. His anger keeps slipping out.

The court found Menocchio guilty of heresy and threw him in prison for life. Three years later, a sick and thoroughly chastened Menocchio convinced authorities he'd changed. They released him. He went back to work.

But those beautiful new printed books still surrounded him. Presently he was talking again. This time the trial was shorter. This time they subjected Menocchio, now 67, to a half-hour of torture. In the end, they burned him at the stake.

Menocchio had been seized by the magic of the new technology of printing. Now, 400 years later, we read those old court records in a book. Now Menocchio speaks to scholars once more.

So the book itself has let him outlive his inquisitors. Today, he really does charm scholars. Menocchio finally takes his own place in the very medium that changed history -- and ended his simple life, forever.

I'm John Lienhard, at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work.

(Theme music)

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Ginzburg, C., *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. (tr. John and Anne Tedeschi) London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.