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Citation

Blackbourn, David. 1998. The Madonna of Marpingen: A likely story. *Common Knowledge* 7(2): 112-126.

Published Version

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THE MADONNA OF MARPINGEN

A LIKELY STORY

David Blackburn

Marpingen lies in the northern hill country of the Saarland. Today it is a dormitory suburb of Saarbrücken; in the second half of the nineteenth century it was being transformed from a village of agricultural producers and local craftsmen into a community of worker-peasants. It was an entirely unremarkable place until an incident that took place on 3 July 1876. On that day, three eight-year-old girls were picking bilberries in the local woods when one of them suddenly called out and drew her friends' attention to a "white figure." The girls arrived home in a state of agitation and described seeing a woman in white carrying a child. Encouraged by adults, they returned the following day and saw the figure again. In reply to their question, "Who are you?" they received the answer: "I am the Immaculately Conceived."

That was the beginning. The figure, confidently identified by adults as the Blessed Virgin, instructed that a chapel be built, encouraged the sick to come, and asked that water be taken from a nearby spring. Soon other adults and children claimed to have seen the Virgin. Within a week twenty thousand pilgrims had descended on the village, praying, singing, drinking the "miraculous water," and carrying away earth. Hundreds of cures were publicized in the press. The reported apparitions continued for fourteen months and Marpingen became a cause célèbre, attracting journalists, priests, and the sellers of pious memorabilia. "Marpingen has become the center of events that have shaken the world," wrote one sympathetic commentator. The parish priest described Lourdes as "feeble" by comparison. But there was another side to this new-found attention. The "German Lourdes" was vilified in the liberal press; and the visitors to Marpingen included administrative officials, examining magistrates, gendarmes, soldiers, and a detective named Marlow—actually a secret policeman from Berlin called Leopold Friedrich Wilhelm von Meerscheidt-Hüllessem, who tried to pass himself off as a pious Irish-American journalist. These visitors were concerned

with fraud, riotous assembly, and sedition. In short, the apparition movement collided with the machinery of state, leading to a prolonged struggle that extended from the courtrooms of the Saarland and Rhine Province to the Prussian parliament in Berlin, where Marpingen was the subject of a full-length debate.

By the time the affair blew over in the late 1870's, Marpingen had enjoyed far more than the regulation fifteen minutes of fame—and even that was not quite the end. From the 1930's to the 1950's, there were renewed claims of apparitions. Only in the following years did the cult finally subside, as generational change and the economic miracle succeeded in doing what Prussian soldiers, National Socialists, and successive vicars-general in Trier had failed to do. Support for the Madonna of Marpingen had fed off crises since its inception; it could not survive the stability and well-fed complacency of the Federal Republic.

I first came across Marpingen in the early 1980's, while digging around in works on Catholic popular piety. It was the historical equivalent of love at first sight. I began serious archival research in 1984–85 and wrote a book on the subject that was published in 1993.¹ After a brief narrative “hook,” the book divides into three parts. The first is concerned with context and origins, and moves from the general to the particular, with a progressively sharper focus on Marpingen itself and its circumstances during the 1870's. The second part, the centerpiece of the book, moves in the opposite direction. It examines the different meanings of the incident, beginning with the visionaries, their families, and fellow villagers, continuing through the pilgrims and clergy, and ending with the broader political resonance. Part three considers the complex aftermath for church and state authorities, concluding with a coda on Marpingen in the twentieth century.

Why revisit the topic? The short answer is: because the editors of *Common Knowledge* asked me to write about the methods, conclusions, and implicit ethics of the book. What follows is an attempt to do that—some reflections on how we frame our material, extend our imaginative sympathy, opt for one tone of voice rather than another. I believe that there is much to be said for trying to discuss issues like these on the basis of a specific body of evidence. The absence of engagement with particular texts and the problems of narrative strategy they raise has been (for me, anyway) a frustrating aspect of many recent debates over theory. The case for theoretical loss of innocence, very welcome in itself, is often posed at a high level of abstraction; then the voice of historical common sense comes along and says, “yes, yes, but we *know* all that stuff from handling complex source material.” It is worth attempting to find ground on which a more useful discussion can take place.

¹David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Bismarckian Germany* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), published in the USA as *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (New York: Knopf, 1994). The quotations that appear later in this essay follow the pagination of the American edition.

Marpingen belongs to a familiar modern genre: one that selects an incident and tries to unpack its meaning. This genre is so familiar by now that we may be tempted to take it for granted. A generation ago, in the heyday of the (then) confident new social history, things were different. The classic historical work of that period was more likely to concern itself with long-term social processes and structures—the formation of classes or the modern state, the modernization of crime or leisure, the social origins of dictatorship and democracy. All that “making,” “shaping,” and “recasting” was the outcrop of a particular historiographical moment. Even the titles have a certain period charm—nowadays things are “invented” or “imagined.” In those days historians borrowed liberally from the social sciences, discovered the charms of quantification, and championed comparative history (some even practicing what they preached). It would not be unfair to say that “modernization” provided the paradigm within which much of this work was conceived—and, in this respect, Marxists and non-Marxists had a good deal in common, even if it was non-Marxists who tended to be the truest believers in a developmental theory of the way in which societies modernized or “failed” to modernize.

This was an ambitious endeavor, captured in the title of a book by Charles Tilly: *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons*.² One of its greatest (and least acknowledged) achievements was to help break down parochial national historiographies by providing a common vocabulary. Social-science history of 1970’s vintage was like the international style in architecture—for better and worse. For it now seems clear that, just as modernization has lost its allure within our culture, so the kind of approach just described has lost its place at the cutting edge of what historians do. It gave us new ways of looking at the past, but also left a lot out: the human dimension, for one thing; local variation, for another; the fact that societies consist of women as well as men, for a third. Taking a limited and specific incident as a subject was one response, part of a shift of attention from the abstract to the particular, from structures to meanings, from aggregates to individuals or small human groups. It went hand in hand with the growing tendency among historians to make use of conceptual weapons taken from anthropology, the study of folklore, or the humanities (literary theory, iconology), rather than from the social sciences. The former seemed to offer more help in decoding the realms of experience and everyday culture; at the very least, they suggested another potentially fruitful way of interrogating the usual Weberian suspects—class, status, and power.

Among the celebrated works in this idiom are Carlo Ginzburg’s *The Cheese and the Worms*, about the heretical “cosmos” of a sixteenth-century Friulian miller, and Natalie Zemon Davis’s *The Return of Martin Guerre*, the story of a peasant imposter in sixteenth-

²Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1984).

century Languedoc.³ These are works I admire, and I re-read them when at the point of writing *Marpingen*. Distant in time but much less so in theme, the books in question are based on comparably dramatic episodes of transgressions that propelled lower-class members of rural society in front of judges or inquisitors. These encounters generated source material illuminating otherwise obscure matters, including village power-networks; property and inheritance; relations between men and women, young and old; and the uneasy juxtapositions of orthodox and heterodox religious beliefs. *Marpingen* shares the village focus of these books, and a kindred concern to attend seriously to a small world as the window onto a larger world. These books also share some formal similarities. For example, like Natalie Davis in *Martin Guerre* (and elsewhere),⁴ I found it both necessary and productive to consider the different narrative constructs to which the Marpingen events gave rise—beginning with the way that parents and neighbors “improved” on the original story told by the girl, and continuing through the diverse interpretive frameworks into which the apparitions were fitted by sympathetic and skeptical priests, friendly and unfriendly publicists, administrative officials and judges. Yet anyone reading *Marpingen* alongside the other works can hardly fail to be aware of the dissimilarities. In a nutshell: my book is longer and duller. The reason for this is not only (although it is certainly also) that I am a duller writer. I made a decision, reluctantly, that *Marpingen* had to be longer and duller in order to be safer.

Ginzburg and Davis are magnificent storytellers whose works achieve high levels of dramatic tension, but at some cost. Most obviously, both authors build their arguments on chains of inferential reasoning. At the opening of Ginzburg’s book, for example, immediately after the miller “Menocchio” has been introduced, the following terms are used (in just twenty-four lines) in discussing his wealth and status: must have been, probably, must have been, it seems, we don’t know, if, might have, may have. Or consider the opening of Davis’s chapter “The Discontented Peasant”:⁵

Nothing happened in Bertrande’s marriage bed, it seemed, neither that night nor for more than eight years afterward. Martin Guerre was impotent; the couple had been “cast under a spell.”

That may not have been the first of Martin’s misfortunes. Perhaps it was not so easy for the boy from the Labourd to grow up in Artigat. There were languages to sort out: his parents’ Basque and their accented langue d’oc and the language spoken by the people he saw at the tileworks, at harvest, and at mass. Sometimes he must have been allowed to play

³Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982; first published in English by Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980); Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983).

⁴Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

⁵Ginzburg, *Cheese and the Worms*, 1–2; Davis, *Martin Guerre*, 19–20.

with the village youngsters—their elders complained about the children stealing grapes off the vines—and surely he was teased because of his name, Martin. It was common enough in Hendaye, but strange in those years among the Jehans, Arnauds, Jameses, Andreus, Guilhaumes, Antoinnes, Peys, and Bernards of Artigat. That it was the name of a nearby parish made no difference. Martin was what the peasants called an animal, an ass, and in local tradition the bear that the shepherds saw up in the mountains. In the Guerre family, the young lord of the household had to cope not just with one but with two powerful male personalities, both with fiery tempers. Behind him there were nothing but girls, his sister Jeanne and three others, and his cousins, the daughters of Pierre Guerre—nothing but pisseuses. Then, when his penis had barely begun to grow behind his codpiece, another girl came into his life, Bertrande de Rols.

It may never have crossed Sanxi Guerre's mind that his son would have trouble consummating the marriage. The union of so young a lad might be thought wrong in the village because he would lack the economic means and the judgment to have a family of his own and because the watery and tender "humors" of his adolescent body might produce weak semen (so people believed in the sixteenth century). But once a boy had his public hair, the pricks of the flesh were thought to start naturally; if anything, they were too strong. For a while Martin and his family might have hoped the impotence would pass. In the Basque country there was a custom that allowed young men "the freedom to try out their women . . . before marrying them"; maybe this could be looked at as a period of sexual trial. But Martin was growing up to be a tall, slender youth, very agile in the way Basque men were supposed to be and good at village swordplay and acrobatics. Bertrande was growing into a beautiful young woman ("belle" would be the first word Coras later used to describe her). Still nothing happened. Bertrande's family was pressing her to separate from Martin; since the marriage was unconsummated, it could be dissolved after three years and she would be free by canon law to marry again. It was humiliating, and the village surely let them know about it.

It seemed, may not have been, perhaps, must have been, surely, may have, might be, might have, maybe, surely: although Davis writes very openly about problems of evidence, she also achieves the effect of plausibility by implicit rhetorical strategies. One recurring pattern is a paragraph in the subjunctive that is rounded off with a ringing indicative, which has the effect of overriding all that carefully expressed doubt.⁶

To be clear: I do not believe that facts speak for themselves. Sources have to be read against the grain, unspoken assumptions inferred. Only the Unabomber is considerate

⁶These two works have also received attention of a similar sort. See Robert Finlay, "The Refashioning of Martin Guerre," and Natalie Zemon Davis's reply, "On the Lame," *American Historical Review* 93 (June 1988) 3:553–71 and 3:572–603, respectively (I find Finlay's attack unfair on several points); and Michael Maurer, "Geschichte und Geschichten," in *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 11 (1991): 674–91.

enough to label his hit list "Hit List." *Marpingen* contains its own examples of inferential argument. Let me quote a few. Officials, priests, and notaries "may also have attributed to vanity and acquisitiveness what was in fact the product of a strategy designed to maintain family holdings." The wives of peasant-miners "probably paid a higher price for their new autonomy than women in the coalfield." A violent form of village patriotism "may have been especially prominent in Marpingen because of the 'outsiders' who had acquired land within the village." Instances of reading between the lines or reading for silences become somewhat more frequent in the discussion of the various retractions, and retractions of retractions, made by the central Marpingen visionary, Margaretha Kunz.⁷ But compared with the other two works, the inferential arguments are (1) far fewer in number; (2) less constitutive of central claims; and (3) offered, as it were, singly, and in conjunction with propositions that can be supported with other evidence.

If I seem to be laboring this point, there is a good reason for getting down to cases. Too much of what has been written in recent years about how historians construct their narratives proceeds on a high level of generality. Writers such as Hayden White or Sande Cohen make their global claims about the emplotment of history; empiricist historians react allergically with an overly absolute defense of archival procedures.⁸ These, at any rate, are the rather Manichaean terms in which the issue is commonly posed when historians get together at conferences or on the Internet. There is a better way, and it does not consist of simply splitting the difference. It has been marked out by writers such as Roger Chartier and the late Michel de Certeau in France, Nancy Partner and Allan Megill in North America, who have all in their different ways recognized the narrative, "fictive" quality in history (the Aristotelian "emplotment of represented actions"), while noting the constraints, obligations, and procedures that prevent historians from acting as if "anything goes."⁹ What we are dealing with here is not a matter of absolutes, of either/or, but of particular cases—and it might be helpful to have more reflection on these issues as they affect practicing historians, and especially *from* practicing historians, rather than yet another demonstration of how Ranke or

⁷See *Marpingen*, 49, 57, 68, 110–12.

⁸Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), and *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), esp. chaps. 1–5; Sande Cohen, *Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and, for a no-nonsense response, Arthur Marwick, "Two Approaches to Historical Study: The Metaphysical (Including 'Postmodernism') and the Historical," *Journal of Contemporary History* 30 (1995) 1:5–34.

⁹See Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988; original French edition, Gallimard, 1975); Roger Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), esp. 13–47; Nancy F. Partner, "Historicity in an Age of Reality-Fictions," and Allan Megill, "'Grand Narrative' and the Discipline of History," both in *The New Philosophy of History*, ed. Frank R. Ankersmit and Hans Kellner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 21–39 and 151–73, respectively.

Michelet constructed his narrative.¹⁰ If a principle is involved, it is what might be called the principle of proportionality. How many subjunctives can an argument stand? What should be the correct length of the chain that tethers the historian to the sources? What are the gains and losses in choosing to construct a historical account in one way rather than another?

To return, then, to *Marpingen*. It is—alas!—longer and duller than two of the works on which I once thought to model it. It is longer partly because it contains many footnotes (hidden away by a horrified American trade publisher as endnotes),¹¹ and partly as the result of a slower-paced text that stops to give more background information and context. It is duller because the human characters stand out less from the physical and social settings they inhabited than they do in the classic microhistory—there is even, indeed, quantitative evidence on matters such as migration, indebtedness, and epidemics, the kind of material deprecated by Carlo Ginzburg for reducing the people to silent anonymity. I share his view—up to a point. Using aggregate statistics can certainly have a numbing, dehumanizing effect, missing the *quality* of events or transactions; but the social-science historian in me would still argue for the importance of counting, where possible, as a check on a too-easy impressionism. At the same time, there is a curious paradox in Ginzburg's own book, as there is in some other microhistories, namely that works so often discussed in terms of Clifford Geertz's "thick description" actually describe rather little beyond the mental activities of their dramatis personae. The Friuli of *The Cheese and the Worms* is a surprisingly thin, unrealized place; the Artigat of *Martin Guerre* is sketched with a broad brush.

Naturally, historians of later centuries have things easier, working in the age of statistics and modern bureaucracies, ecclesiastical as well as lay. They have more paperwork, more evidence. And yet: the difficulties and lacunae of early fourteenth-century sources did not prevent Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie from rendering the village of Montaillou in rich detail, in a book that combines the history of mentalities with a strong sense of topography and the materiality of life.¹² Nor did exiguous early eighteenth-century documentation prevent Jonathan Spence from giving readers a sharp physical sense of Canton and the Brazilian Bay of Angels, Port Louis, and Char-

¹⁰An excellent discussion of the practice of contemporary French historians is to be found in Philippe Carrard, *Poetics of the New History: French Historical Discourse from Braudel to Chartier* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), which contains a close and usually persuasive reading of historical texts.

¹¹Perhaps a footnote on footnotes is in order. Many recent writers on historical poetics have identified the footnote, along with other elements of the scholarly apparatus and stylistic techniques such as avoidance of the first person singular, as representational forms that affirm the "authority" of the historical text. True enough. But we should not neglect the powerful pressures exerted in the opposite direction by the dominant culture, which make the footnote a source of embarrassment and even an object of hostility—the badge of dry-as-dust pedantry.

¹²Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294–1324* (London: Scolar Press, 1978). It should be said, in fairness, that Le Roy Ladurie's use of sources has also drawn criticism. See L. E. Boyle, "Montaillou Revisited: *Mentalité* and Methodology," in *Pathways to Medieval Peasants*, ed. James A. Raftis (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1981), 119–40.

enton, in his magnificent microhistory *The Question of Hu*.¹³ We are not just victims of our sources. We make choices about what to include and exclude, and that means, among other things, balancing the claims of narrative drive against the demands of conceptualization, of providing information, and of attributing source material.

While I was thinking through how to organize the Marpingen material, I felt a reserve that was more craftsmanly than theoretical about the sacrifices that would be entailed in turning it into a 130-page *histoire scandaleuse*. Today, I am additionally struck by the irony of the fact that Ginzburg's and Davis's texts are considered exemplary of contemporary experimentation with historical form. Ginzburg's rhetorical devices—short episodic scenes (or “takes”), sudden shifts in the time sequence, the repetition of uncontextualized phrases as leitmotifs—depend on withholding information from the reader, then suddenly disclosing it. Davis places her characters' psychological motivation at the center of her narrative, consciously echoing fictional forms (“Martin dreamed of life beyond the confines of fields of millet, of tileworks, properties, and marriages”).¹⁴ The irony in this is that historians have repeatedly been told, by Hayden White and others, that they are stuck in a nineteenth-century, premodernist mode of “realist” narration. It is an important point that deserves serious consideration. Yet the model of the much-praised experimental deviations from the conventional mode would appear to be the novel of sensation—or rather, a subset of that genre. In a celebrated article on “Clues,” Ginzburg compared the conjectural methods of the microhistorian with the methods of Sherlock Holmes, and Davis has observed that the literary construction of *Martin Guerre* was intended to allow the book to be read at one sitting “like a detective story.”¹⁵

So far I have been talking about structure, but there is also a question of historical “voice.” Dealing with it requires a word about the central subject matter of *Marpingen*. Whereas most of the classic microhistories of late medieval or early modern Europe have religious issues at their core, the same is not true of comparable works regarding the modern period. The latter are typically based on a vodka riot, a great fire, a cholera epidemic—resolutely secular incidents. It is as if a mental portcullis falls somewhere

¹³Jonathan Spence, *The Question of Hu* (New York: Knopf, 1988), an account of the Chinese Catholic John Hu, who accompanied a Jesuit missionary to France in 1722 and was eventually incarcerated in the asylum of Charenton.

¹⁴Davis, *Martin Guerre*, 22.

¹⁵Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989); Davis, “On the Lame,” 575. A further irony, with potentially even more subversive implications, is suggested by the work of Jean Baudrillard, who would surely include this form of history (like *vérité*, fly-on-the-wall documentaries) as a prime example of the “panic-stricken production of the real” (or hyper-real) within contemporary culture—part of the larger attachment to an “ideology of lived experience” or “radical authenticity.” All of us who work with historical materials of this kind must feel some sort of vertiginous discomfort when we encounter Baudrillard's phrase about the “frisson of the real.” See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994; original French edition, 1981), esp. 6–7, 27–28, 47.

in the late eighteenth century, dividing the proper subject matter of European history into a "before" and "after." Why? One could reply: obviously, because the "double revolution" (French, Industrial—both upper-case) made Europe a different place; secularization and the rise of the modern isms changed the fabric of social and cultural life, so that the kinds of incident that provide historians with their "cases" are less likely to have a religious character. But this reply is clearly unsatisfactory. The secularization thesis is hard to sustain, for it ignores not only religious persistence but strong evidence of religious revival in the nineteenth century. This judgment may sound a little passé to those concerned with modern British (or American) history, but it would be hard to deny that historians of modern continental Europe have paid, and still pay, too little attention to religion, for reasons rooted in clerical/anticlerical disputes and in teleological habits of mind.¹⁶ That state of affairs is reflected in the striking absence of work on the nineteenth-century equivalents of Ginzburg's "Menocchio" or Ladurie's Cathar heretics. The equivalents were numerous, and include the itinerant prophets whose followers likened themselves to Béguines; the school classes suffering from "diabolical possession"; the outbreaks of "collective religious hysteria" affecting the female population of entire villages; and—not least—the hundreds of reported but canonically rejected apparitions.

Nowhere has that neglect been greater than in Germany. While I was working on *Marpingen*, people often asked if it was difficult to deal with an episode centered on miraculous claims. Some of the skeptics were nonscholars, but in Germany the doubters included perplexed historians. To extend the normal imaginative sympathy (*Verstehen*) to Mariolatrous peasants and miners meant going against ingrained, sometimes quite bilious views on Catholic popular piety: Hans-Ulrich Wehler, never mealy-mouthed on this subject, has recently written of such phenomena in terms of "the archaic mother-cult," "idolatry," and "heathen superstitions."¹⁷ On the other hand, my subject was also one that profoundly embarrassed Catholic historians (a minority, but highly organized, in Germany), who preferred to talk about anything rather than *that* kind of thing—and who had, in fact, paid about as much attention to events like Marpingen as Lord Acton did. Where popular piety was fleetingly glimpsed in historical accounts, it was generally seen, at best, as a sign of how slowly modernization spread its benefits, and at worst, as a worrying instance of irrationalism. Or, in the case

¹⁶De Certeau, as usual, has some rich and reflective comments on this issue within French historiography. He notes that religious history continued to be "hard to think" within the new socioeconomic history that was being fashioned in the interwar years by Henri Sée, Marc Bloch, Ernest Labrousse, and others. On the other hand, de Certeau is surely right to argue that, as Christianity became less of an active and divisive force within French society after the war, it was simultaneously "opened" as a historical subject. Yet, in his own work and that of others (not only in France), it remains the case that the early modern period benefited far more than the nineteenth century from this opening. See Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 22–34 (quotations on pp. 24, 33).

¹⁷Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 3, *Von der "Deutschen Doppelrevolution" bis zum Beginn des Ersten Weltkrieges, 1849–1914* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1995), 386, 392.

of a British historian whose standpoint might have led one to expect more sympathy, the governing tone was comedic. In *The French Revolution in Germany*, Timothy Blanning deploys a chapter on popular religion to underscore the isolation of French occupiers from the local Catholic population of the Rhineland: it fits his thesis neatly that the Rhinelanders were more interested in revelations than revolution. Yet he cannot resist well-bred sneering at the “anti-French” plagues of caterpillars, stigmata, and the rest—a wonderful example of how to have your cake and eat it, and still claim to be on a low-fat diet.¹⁸

What voice to adopt, therefore: hostile, chiding, regretful, urbane, satirical? I opted for a stance of sympathetic identification toward the seers and their supporters, leavened by a mildly ironic tone here and there. This was not so difficult to achieve. If one passes over for a moment the fact that supernatural claims lay at the heart of the book, there was nothing especially novel about a historian in the 1980’s trying to rescue members of the common people from the “enormous condescension of posterity”—E. P. Thompson’s words, the phrase that launched a thousand books.¹⁹ There was even a specific precedent in the modest little shelf of books devoted to nineteenth-century millenarian movements, albeit mostly by writers who regarded millenarianism as a kind of stand-in for the “mature” class consciousness that had not yet developed. And historians concerned with early modern Europe had already shown how the pursuit of religious experience could bring us closer to the “ordinary person”: the mystical (in de Certeau’s eloquent words) “favoured the illuminations of the illiterate, the experience of women, the wisdom of fools, the silence of the child.”²⁰ Moreover, sympathy for the beliefs in question, the actions they gave rise to, and the experiences suffered as a result came naturally enough. The Prussian state, by its brutality and chicanery, created an inbuilt sympathy for priests, villagers, and visionary children. Every reviewer of *Marpingen* picked up on *that* point without the slightest difficulty.

They also took the cue offered to them in the treatment of progressive and liberal attacks on the apparitions. The incidents at Marpingen represented everything that liberals hated: superstition, disorder, the power of the priest, the rule of the mob, the idiocy of rural life. Liberal press and politicians directed bitter diatribes at “credulous” villagers, “stupid” pilgrims, and—of course—“hysterical” women. The language of these attacks was shot through with misogyny and pseudoscientific references to pathological episodes. The violent, dehumanizing contempt of these liberals tells us

¹⁸Timothy C. W. Blanning, *The French Revolution in Germany: Occupation and Resistance in the Rhineland, 1792–1802* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 207–54, esp. 237–38.

¹⁹E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 13.

²⁰De Certeau used this formulation (unknown to me when I worked on *Marpingen*) in a 1982 interview in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, cited in Chartier, *The Edge of the Cliff*, 46. See also de Certeau’s “Mystic Speech,” in Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 80–100.

something important about the price that they were willing to pay in order to make the world over in their own image—or to have others remake it for them, if necessary at the point of a bayonet. Pointing up this coercive element in the nineteenth-century creed of progress seems to me important; but it is also a bit like shooting fish in a barrel. In retrospect, when it comes to the issue of authorial standpoint, I wonder if the real snare in writing about a case like Marpingen is not so much the risk of sneering at Mariolatrous villagers as the danger of treating their experience too piously. I am not referring to the hagiographical temptation of assuming that Our Lady did appear with a message (although Father René Laurentin, who has compiled documentary evidence on Lourdes, demonstrates that believing in the reality of apparitions is no bar to serious scholarship).²¹ Secular hagiography—populist history, romanticizing the peasant believer and the robust naturalness of the “other”—is a greater problem. Once, this danger faced those who wrote about the labor movement; now it faces anyone who deals with popular religion. It is an issue that has recently been raised by Gerald Strauss in an article entitled “The Dilemma of Popular History.”²² The same point has often been made by German critics of the sentimentalization characteristic of some forms of *Alltagsgeschichte*, the history of everyday life.

Was I too soft on the villagers, too tough on their liberal and official opponents? Surely the Marpingers and their supporters were, among other things, venal and intolerant—toward Protestants, toward wavering priests, toward doubters? To put the question the other way round: Do the Prussian officials and liberals of the 1870's not deserve rather more sympathy, given their understandable fears that credulity was being cynically exploited? Or, to put the question in crudely “presentist” terms: How can the historian Blackburn present the intolerant as victims, while citizen Blackburn believes that Salman Rushdie is a victim of intolerance? Of course, the Rushdie parallel is inexact. No one put out a contract on Rudolf Virchow, the progressive scientist, for mocking miracles. And Catholics, on the other hand, were handed out more than disrespect by the Prussian state (although I do not underestimate the importance of disrespect). The reactions of Prussian officials and their liberal supporters were clearly disproportionate and counterproductive. From the Ministry of the Interior and its nefarious secret policeman to the soldiers and gendarmes, Marpingen was a showcase for every cliché about the unlovely Prussian state. Marpingen would not have become a cause célèbre, nor would the episode have generated the documentation that it did, but for this harsh response. No repression, no book.

At the same time, *Marpingen* tries to complicate this picture in at least two ways. First, I argue, Bismarckian Prussia was ultimately a state susceptible to political em-

²¹Lourdes: *Dossiers des documents authentiques*, 7 vols., ed. René Laurentin et al. (Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1958–66).

²²Gerald Strauss, “The Dilemma of Popular History,” *Past and Present* 132 (1991): 130–49, and the exchange between William Beik and Strauss in *Past and Present* 141 (1993): 207–19.

barrassment and also constrained by due process. Legal officials expressed misgivings, senior officials became uneasy, and one by one the cases brought against Marpingen "perpetrators" unraveled in the courts. This is not quite Costa-Gavras's *Z* (heroic examining magistrate exposes brutal power elite), but it is an important subplot that shows how Prussian legal officials and judges upheld the rule of law, variously motivated by conscience, professional pride, and irritation that their time was being wasted. Secondly, it is just as important to understand the complex mix of circumstance and mentality that brought about the repression initially meted out by the state. Panic and local grudges both played a part at the outset, reinforcing habits of thought that were hard-wired in the Prussian state—bureaucratic inflexibility, military contempt for civilians, Protestant disdain for Catholics. These are easy enough to recognize. It may be harder, though, to see that the repressors at Marpingen often genuinely felt that *they* were the ones under siege. Complaints about villagers "spying" on them and about clerical or French plots litter the official record, suggesting a thin-red-line mentality. The passive resistance practiced by villagers, tacitly supported by many communal officials, undoubtedly raised the frustration level of gendarmes and other officials who came from outside. Read between the lines of their reports, and it is plain that they did find it difficult to deal with the tiny pinpricks of nonviolent resistance, dumb insolence, and mockery. The occasional pilgrim who swung a miner's club at them was something they could understand and deal with—the Saarland coalfield was full of miners who used clubs (not to mention knives and fists, occasionally even guns). But how was one to respond to village women making jokes about them in dialect, or saying the rosary in public? Did Marian hymns or flowers decorating the apparition site challenge the dignity of the state? Gendarmes certainly thought so; and they were not entirely wrong, although in this there was a strong element of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Still, how were Prussian authorities to bring the villains to book without making themselves appear ridiculous? Consider the occasion when several hundred Marpingen women aged between twenty-five and fifty were required to file past three hapless eyewitnesses, in a vain effort to identify who had been guilty of placing a cross in the woods. The comedy in this scene is darker than it seems, for we must recognize the frustration and unvoiced rage that drove the authorities to continue with such absurd and fruitless quests. If that is true of ham-handed officials, it is perhaps even truer of the liberals who ground their teeth about Marpingen. They raged at an episode that seemed to mock the dignity of science and the century of progress. Just as the actions of the Prussian state denoted weakness as much as strength, so the violent bombast of liberal rhetoric denoted impotence; which may be why liberal anticlericals so often emphasized their own "manliness." Read liberal texts against the grain, therefore, as social historians do when dealing with lower-class protagonists, and you find anxiety, even fatalism—about clerical power, about credulity and the dead weight of ignorance. The same liberal politicians and newspapers who labeled Catholics "incorri-

gible" were also most likely to demand "the most energetic measures," as if measures, however energetic, could correct the incorrigible.

Accordingly, while there can be little argument about the coercion practiced by many Prussian officials in Marpingen or about the verbal violence of their liberal supporters, perhaps we can also agree that there was pathos in the roles they understood themselves to be playing. This was a point of view I tried to suggest in a passage strategically placed at the very end of the introduction to *Marpingen*:

Who now wants to make the effort to understand why a Rudolf Virchow—doctor, pathologist, scientific popularizer, and self-conscious progressive—thought that civilization itself was at stake over Marpingen? It has become for historians an unfashionable frame of mind, and those who were once disdainful are now in their turn disdained. Easier by far to summon up empathy for an oppressed Saarland villager seeking solace in the Blessed Virgin than to understand the martinets of modernity. Easier too, perhaps, to see why Marpingen felt itself a village under siege than to appreciate why local officials feared for public order. But if we are to take mentalities seriously we must also try to enter—and enter generously—into the world of a Virchow or a district official.²³

I should add now that the view represented in this passage was arrived at only after working through the material, by which time I was notably more sympathetic to the frustrations faced by liberals and officials than I had been earlier. Perhaps deposits of that earlier lack of generosity remain in the text. Certainly, if I were writing it today, I would emphasize even more the genuine ethical dilemmas as well as the sense of isolation that these men felt.

Finally, turning to those Saarland villagers: Were they portrayed warts and all? This issue—the problem of sentimentality—is also addressed directly in the introduction to *Marpingen* and in many of the arguments that follow. For example, I tried to question some of the obvious populist clichés about apparitions, where the evidence clearly subverted them. The seers were not conveniently poor peasants: in the Marpingen case, as in others, being "de-classed" was usually more important than being poor. Nor can apparition movements be seen simply as movements of women, or children, or the underclass. Those movements took off when men and village notables lent them legitimacy; aristocrats were an influential element among the pilgrims, and small traders a numerically significant one. To take another example, apparition sites were not remote: they were marginal, which is different. And, not least, claims of apparitions were not a product of "traditional" rural resentment against encroaching "modernity," but rather the outcrop of a religious revival, partly popular, partly clerical-led, which was itself infused with unmistakably "modern" features. Pilgrims took the train to Mar-

²³ *Marpingen*, xxxiv.

pingen and bought mass-produced kitsch; villagers had the prototype of the Lourdes hotels and promenades before their eyes. Not much sentimentality there.

As for popular piety, the dark side of the Marpingen events must surely impress itself on readers of the book. Eight-year-old girls were steered by adults, including their own parents, down a path from which they were frightened to return. Their efforts to gratify the expectations of the faithful led them to reckless invention, which they called prophecy. Sometimes the result was banal (a schoolteacher would miss an appointment); sometimes it was not (a child would die). Pilgrims helped to heighten the atmosphere. There were reports of celestial processions, and rumors spread that a virulent plague was imminent, from which only those who possessed the miraculous water of Marpingen would be spared. Meanwhile, villagers exerted tremendous psychological pressure on skeptics. Few had a more difficult time during the apparitions than people caught between the fronts—village schoolteachers and communal officials, priests from neighboring villages—who were suspected by the authorities of complicity, or at least of not stamping out the nonsense, yet found themselves the butt of Catholic ire for their “lukewarm” or “rationalist” skepticism. A good example is furnished by the neighboring village of Berschweiler, one of many localities in which imitative apparitions were reported. There, a group of a dozen children who claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary in Marpingen fought violent, convulsive nightly struggles against the devil, watched by large crowds. These grim performances often lasted beyond midnight; afterwards clubs would be banged on the doors of skeptics and threats shouted out against Protestants in this denominationally mixed village. The local priest was turned away when he tried to intervene.

Marpingen did not set out to mock popular beliefs, of course, or to adopt the views of Prussian officials, irate anticlericals, and clergy alarmed about what happened in the village. I tried to take the apparitions seriously, to explore their meanings, not to write them off as irrational. Conversely, I had harsh words for the state and its liberal supporters. It is not at all surprising that reviewers and others should have read the book in that way: they were meant to. There are readers, however, who appear to have found *only* that plot. Why? Reflecting with hindsight, it seems possible that some of the verbal cues in the book encouraged a one-sided reading. For example, anyone writing about this subject who fastidiously holds the word *superstition* at arm's length is—in effect— withholding authorial endorsement from a key charge made by Marpingen's critics. Yet I am fairly sure that something larger was at work among readers. A generation ago, liberal and conservative historiography shared a broad suspicion of the “irrational” masses. Now things are different, on both left and right. Bottom-up historians are primed to welcome a demonstration of the price paid by common people in their encounters with modernity and the carceral state; conservatives (like the writer who praised *Marpingen* in the *National Review*) have their own reasons to celebrate the sympathy bestowed on “religious folk.”

But, in the words of J. Alfred Prufrock: "That is not it at all, / That is not what I meant at all." Consciously, at any rate, my intention in the book was not simply to invert the old plot, with liberals and officials now cast as villains, Catholics as martyrs. Instead, I wanted to tell the story in a way that brought out the moral ambiguities of the episode and its human actors. Visionaries, families, villagers, pilgrims, parish clergy, clerical hierarchy, government officials, liberals—all had moments when they wielded power in some form, and other moments when they were cast as victims; all moved backward and forward between the moral high ground and low ground. Even the most sympathetic have feet of clay, such as the Marpingen parish priest, Jacob Neureuter, and the principal visionary, Margaretha Kunz, who is depicted in different situations as bullied and bully, innocent and petulant, frightened and manipulative. Even the most odious have some claim on our sympathy: the soldiers and officials who were pensioned off, the secret policeman who took his own life after one scandal too many. And even the most satirically drawn have their moments of dignity, like the gadfly twentieth-century Catholic publicist, Friedrich von Lama, who besieged the clerical authorities for twenty years with wild and unwittingly comic letters urging them to recognize the "German Lourdes"—until the moment that he was murdered alongside his son in a Nazi concentration camp, a sudden and shocking twist that must necessarily change readers' views of him.

What is true of the individual historical actors is also true of the larger moral issues raised by Marpingen. It is clearly unhelpful to treat the visionaries and their supporters as irrational, backward-looking peasants and to laud their opponents as the sorely tried upholders of reason. But it is also problematic simply to turn this moral judgment upside down. My own feelings were simultaneously repelled by the crass certainties and engaged by the pathos on both sides. That neither/nor stance drove the book—the desire to keep shaking the moral kaleidoscope so that sympathy shifted as the issues were posed in new ways, the attempt to write in a variety of registers between hostility and sentimentality. Given the generous reception that *Marpingen* received, it may seem ungrateful to complain about the instances when these efforts fell on stony ground. But what prompted me, more than anything else, to accept the invitation of *Common Knowledge* was a brooding sense that some reviewers, however kind, had read the clear story line they wanted to read, namely that Marpingen was a village of victims. Historians and other academics might talk about loss of certainty or the problems of situating the self, but in the larger culture victim-history strikes an immediate chord. Marpingen as victim really *is* a likely story, a true master narrative of our times.