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Doctor Lopez Is Innocent

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Was Doctor Roderigo Lopez really a traitor, or was he simply an innocent secretly practising Jew, and the victim of a political plot? The question is generally left ambiguously, and unduly, unanswered.

As is widely known, on 7 June 1594, Doctor Lopez was hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn, convicted of high treason for supposedly trying to poison Queen Elizabeth. The charge against him had been brought by the Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, who was himself to be executed – beheaded, as a matter of fact – for high treason in 1601. Doctor Lopez, who, after being physician to the earl of Leicester, was the official physician to the queen, was an easy, credible object of all possible charges, since his origin was Portuguese and, what's more, he was a Jew. He was in fact the son of a New Christian, a Jew who had been forced to convert to Christianity after the mass expulsion of Jews from Portugal in 1497. Despite his conversion and the conversion of his children, Roderigo Lopez, who, by the way, had married a woman of Jewish descent, Sarah Anes, was always believed to be closely connected with and *secretly* practising Judaism in his home, which was a common habit with Jews, since Judaizing was considered a capital crime at the time in England. In short, he was a *Marrano*. A piece of evidence showing that it was not easy for these people to break their connection with their Jewish conscience and identity is offered by Sarah's brother, Jacob, who moved from London to Constantinople and there returned to the open practice of Judaism. Literature has handed down a reflection of Lopez's supposed wickedness – and the sense of the way the case strongly affected the Elizabethan imagination – through the figures of Barabbas, the Jew of Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*, a play that was revived after Lopez's death, and Shakespeare's Shylock, in *The Merchant of Venice*, which is supposed to date from 1596-1598. Doctor Lopez was insulted, or so the story runs, until the moment of his death, as a traitor to the queen and to the Christian faith. He was convicted of treason in January 1594, and in February of that year

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he was arrested and condemned to death. For three whole months the queen kept from signing his death warrant. Finally, on 7 June, he was sentenced. Strangely enough, the queen allowed his wife Sarah to retain most of his property – which would have generally been forfeited to the crown. And, strangely enough, the queen also paid for the maintenance at school of Lopez’s son Anthony. As a matter of fact, one is made to wonder why the queen did not seem to be so furious with and bear a grudge against the family of the person who was charged with trying to poison her. Something even more strange, however, was to occur between February and June, while Doctor Lopez was a prisoner in the Tower. In a letter of 15 March 1594, written by Tomaso Contarini, the Venetian Ambassador in Germany, to the Doge and Senate of Venice one can read the following piece of news: “The Queen is ill. She has taken a Portuguese doctor out of prison to attend her case” (in *Calendar of State Papers Venetian, 1592-1603*, in Archivio di Venezia, Senato, Dispacci). A laconic but telling report. Needless to say that the “Portuguese doctor” was Roderigo Lopez, the only person the queen evidently trusted and thought could take good care of her health. One wonders would the queen have resorted to a traitor who had tried to poison her if she had believed the charges against him could be true. Considering, moreover, that he could have really poisoned her now, when called to her bedside, risking nothing more than the death sentence that had already been passed against him. It seems beyond all doubt that the queen had full confidence in Doctor Lopez and that she was well aware that the charges against him had been fabricated for political reasons.