

Dr. Roderigo Lopez

Many people think Shakespeare wrote the Merchant of Venice because of this famous event in 1594

As an island people, surrounded by enemies, and embroiled in religious wars, the English neither liked nor trusted foreigners. In 1593 Dr. Roderigo Lopez: a Jew from Portugal, physician to the Queen, "The Queen's little ape" became the hated enemy of the Earl of Essex, one of the most powerful men in the kingdom.

Lopez had good connections in Portugal, and Walshingham, the head of the Secret Service, found him to be a reliable forwarding agent to and from English spies on the Iberian peninsula. When Walshingham died in 1590, Essex took over the services of Lopez. From that point on Lopez would give Essex little gobbets of information which he would use to ingratiate himself with the Queen. One morning a beaming Essex approached the throne with the white-hot bit of news and was told by his all-knowing sovereign that she already knew it. Lopez had gone behind Essex's back straight to the queen, and Essex was determined to get his revenge. An opportunity arose when a man called Tinocco confessed that he, and another man named Ferrara, had been sent over to England to persuade Lopez to work for the Spanish cause. They even claimed that Lopez had accepted a rich jewel from the Spanish King. Lopez was questioned and his rooms searched and no incriminating evidence could be found. The Queen accused Essex of malice and he went away disgraced.

Essex then spent the winter building up such a plausible case against Lopez that the attorney general had to take action. Impelled as much by anti-Semitic prejudice as hard evidence the jury found Lopez, Tinocco and Ferrara guilty of plotting against the Queen's life, and decreed the appropriate punishment for treason.

There were crowds scurrying west, roaring, chewing bread and bits of garlic sausage, some armed with bottles against the summer heat, the plebs, the commons, the mob.

The nobles in their carriages move with some difficulty over the cobbles of the narrow streets with its toppling shops and houses; they could hear the confusion of the horses' feet, feeling their coaches jostled by the jeering crowds. The footmen shout abuse at those who come near enough to scare the horses or finger the gleaming brass and polished harness. The coachmen lash out! There are cries of pain and growls, but the under dog remains under.

At Tyburn they draw the curtains back to let light in, and a grim holiday vision appears; a whole clutter of noble's coaches, on some of which the gaily and richly dressed have climbed to the roof or ousted the footmen from their seat. The sober citizens sit, more soberly, inside their coaches. All wait.

There is the tree. Crouched on the platform the hangman's assistant is securing plank with busy hammer. The hangman himself, masked, with brawny arms folded, struts like an actor, but an actor who needs no glory of words.

2 From afar comes a roar. The hurdles are approaching, dragged over dry ground, raising a coughing dust. One of the draggers, with a toothless idiot's face, greets friends from a black and panting mouth. There are jeers. Men spit on the still figures roped to the hurdles. A young woman in front begins to jump, partly to see better, partly in a transport of expectancy. A child is lifted onto his father's shoulders.

Other of the hangman's assistants brings a great metal bowl with four steaming kettles. The crowd cheers as the near boiling water is splashed into the bowl. One kettle carrier makes as he will pour a scalding stream over the spectators nearest the tree; they retreat in a scurry, screaming their laughter to his grin.

The hurdles have reached the end of their journey. And now, Tinoco. A foreign and heathen name. He is to be first. A dark, shivering man has his shirt stripped from him as he is roughly untied from the hurdle. Stumbling, falling in fear, and all to the crowds laughter, he is made to mount the ladder, rung by slow trembling rung. Behind him, behind the tree, the hanger waits on a narrow crude podium. He is a young man, muscular; his mouth opens with some ribald pleasantry to his victim as he secures the hempen noose about his neck. The lips of the victim move as in prayer, the trembling hands seek to join in prayer, but can not. Of a sudden the noose is tightened; Over the momentary inbreathed silence of the crowd the choking desperation of the hanged can clearly be heard. The second assistant pulls the ladder away sharply. The legs dangle, and the bulging eyes blink. Here is art: the hangman approaches with his knife, fire in the sunlight, and before the neck can crack, rips downward from the heart to the groin in one slash, quickly changes the knife from right to left, then plunges a mottled fist inside the body. The first assistant takes the bloody knife from his master and wipes it with care on a clean cloth, all the while his eyes on the artistry of the drawing. The right hand withdraws, dripping, holding up for all to see, a heart in its fatty wrappings; then the left hand plunges to reappear all coiled and clotted with entrails. The crowd cheers; the girl in front leaps and claps; the child on his father's shoulders thumbsucks, indifferent, understanding nothing of all this, the adult world.

The ruined body is hoisted a moment as the noose is loosened, and then is plunked on the platform. The hangman throws the heart and the guts into the steaming bowl, freeing his arms from encrustations with quick fingers, drying them, unwashed on a towel. The crowd moans its pleasure, its excitement, for are there not two more victims to come? The hangman is handed a hatchet, squat and crude compared to that artist's instrument, but sharp as it cracks through the bone for quartering - the arms, the legs, the head. The gaping torso is upheld a moment, then all the pieces of the man are thrown into a basket.

Next comes Ferrara, gross and heavy, the flesh shaking on his hairy chest, his three chins wobbling to the crowd's pleasure, his eyes rolling like those of some insentient doll. Here is comedy, a sort of Kemp. Ferrara squeals like a pig, going, "No, no, no, no!", as he is thrust up the ladder, groaning dismally from his belly's depths as the noose goes about his no-neck. This time the hangman is a fraction too slow with his knife; Ferrara is dead already as the point pierces. But there is a great fat heart, crammed like a goose's liver, dripping treason, treason, treason; the entrails are endless, an eternity of pink sausage; the crowd is a-roar with delight at the fatness of the chopped limbs.

And finally, the crowning course of this rich dinner. Dr. Roderigo Lopez, Jew, Machiavel, small and black, and chattering like an ape. Let him not be granted the least dignity in his dying: strip all off. There's a fair sized thursday for thee; mark, he is like all foreigners for the appurtenances of lust. Lopez prays aloud in a high screaming voice, then in ridiculous foreigner's English: I love deKvin. Ass mosh ass I loff Zhessoss Krist-" The crowd splits their sides with laughter but are, at the same time, most indignant; this naked foreign monkey saying the Holy Name, screaming with that smart filthy rod, of his love for the Queen. Dispatch, but not too slowly. And then articulo mortis, his body spurts, but not with blood. Parents shocked, cover the eyes of their children. Draw! Draw! Draw! The hangman's hands reek. Then he goes with his hatchet for the body as he would mince it fine.

The crowd is sated, spent, purged, cleansed, splitting up into decent family groups, proceeding to the quiet of their houses.

In The Merchant of Venice, when Shylock is asked why he wants Antonio's flesh, this speech would surely resonate with an Elizabethan audience.

To bait fish withal: if it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge.

He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million;

laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation,

thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies;

and what's his reason? I am a Jew.

Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?

fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons,

subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means,

warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?

If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh?

If you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?

If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.

If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge.

If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge.

The villany you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

I think a pound of flesh carefully carved off a living man might just "better the instruction" of a 'traitor's' death.