In 1614, an English lord, probably Henry Wotton, commissioned Leone da Modena, Rabbi in Venice, to write a description of Jewish practices for King James I of England: The Vita, riti e costumi de gl’Hebrei – in brevissimo compendio ma amplamento raccolti & descritti, which was finally published in 1637 as Historia de gli riti hebraici by Jacques (Giacomo) Gaffarel(i) in Paris and again in 1638 as Historia de Riti Hebraici, Vita & of ferzanze degli Hebrei di questi tempi in Venice. Between the first and the second edition a strange case of self-incrimination occurred: a voluntary declaration to the Inquisition by the author himself. In 1637, there was the intense fear of persecution at the hands of Christian authorities. Accordingly Modena imagined that the Paris publication of his Historia de gli riti would bring the Inquisition down on his head and on other Jews as well, as we read in his autobiographical journal Hayye Ye-hudah – Life of Judah: ‘Heartbroken, I shouted and tore at my beard until I lost my breath. I said to myself, “When this book is seen in Rome, it will become a stumbling block for all the Jews and for me, in particular [...].’ As for me, where could I go? I could not escape to Ferrara or to any other place in Italy’ (fol. 25b, 147).

What had happened? A short chronology of the publishing vicissitudes and a comparison of the expressed intentions in Modena’s writings and his actual proceeding in that crucial moment may give an explanation of what Modena intended with his Historia de Riti Hebraici.

Different sources can serve us for this aim, such as the preface (‘Premio’) of the printed versions, the aforementioned autobiography, a manuscript of the Historia entitled Relatione de tutti riti, costumi, e vita degli Hebrei preserved in the Venetian Archives including an autograph

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1 Title from a manuscript copy of the Riti presented by Modena to William Boswell in September 1628, available in St. John’s College Library, Cambridge, L. 19.
3 Archivio di Stato di Venezia (A.S.V.), Sant’Uffizio, busta 94.
letter to the ‘Santissimo Tribunale’ and a letter to an English correspondent of Modena.4

On September 8, 1634, three years before the printing, Modena penned an Italian epistle to Sir William Boswell, in which he mentions his manuscript and his intention to publish it. The passage reads, in translation, as follows: ‘[…] This book of mine about our Rites I have revised, and a few days ago I gave a copy of it to a gentleman from your country named William Spenser. Moreover, at the request of certain friends and patrons (for I did not care about it myself) I am thinking of publishing it this year, and have the intention of doing so in Paris in order to avoid censorship here &c.’5 In his autobiography, Leone da Modena reports the facts about the printing of his book in Paris as follows: ‘After reading it, that Frenchman [J. Gaffarel] asked me to leave it with him and he would print it in France. I agreed, but did not think of editing out the things that the Inquisition in Italy might find unacceptable in a printed book’ (fol. 25a, 146). He continues: ‘Two years later, after I had given up hope that the Frenchman might print it, on the second day of Passover 5397 [April 10, 1637], someone brought me a letter from him, in which he told me that he had printed the book in Paris’ (fol. 25a, 147). Just two weeks later, on April 28, Leone da Modena presented the above mentioned manuscript of his book, including a declaration of his kind intention and obedience in anticipation of censorship or punishment. In this letter to the ‘Santissimo Tribunale’ he feigns surprise at the printing: ‘Questa intendo ultimamente essersi fatta stampar in Parigi col mio nome sotto questo, o altro titolo da un signor Francese.’

Concerning the contents of the manuscript given to the Holy Office, Modena is speaking of a copy and suggests that it is a verbatim duplicate – ‘Ho voluto […] presentar la copia del detto manuscritto che diedi a quel signor, non diforme.’ In reality, the manuscript that he presents to the Tribunal is not an identical one but a changed version of the one printed in Paris. Further, Modena alleges that the manuscript is written

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5 ‘[…] Quella mia opera de’ nostri Riti ho meglio riformata, et alli giorni passati ne diedi copia ad un gentiluomo di là nomato il Signor Guglielmo Spenser, & a preghi d’amici padroni (ch’io non me ne curava) credo quest’ anno darla alla stampa, e penso farlo far in Parigi per fuggir qualche censura di qui &c.’

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