

The Religious Poetry of the Portuguese-Brazilian New Christian João Mendes da Silva

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João Mendes da Silva is an almost unknown figure of the Portuguese-Brazilian intelligentsia from the end of the 17th and first quarter of the 18th century. Despite his interesting creative work—as well as the personal example he provided us—, three circumstances have weighed heavily against him among literary critics: his Jewish origin, having been forced to denounce a large number of people during his inquisitorial interrogation, and being the father of a brilliant playwright, António José, who was also a martyr of the Inquisition. In addition, we suspect that, whether we admit it or not, anti-Semitic prejudice is not extinct and still influences historiography and criticism (literary or not), in particular when considering that there are objective reasons to deem his behavior cowardly from an objective standpoint. Furthermore, being a father of a highly valued son¹ has afforded him more disadvantages than advantages: thus, while it prevented the complete silencing of João Mendes da Silva, it has not increased scholarly interest in his literary work, which has been obscured by the glitter of António José's works. Nevertheless, because genius rarely springs from nothing, greater attention should have been paid to the family environment in which the famous playwright was educated. While this essay alone cannot repair this injustice, my goal consists of drawing attention to the religious poetry of João Mendes da Silva, based in part on some of the unpublished texts he wrote and that I have newly exhumed during the course of my research.

Let us begin with a brief summary of his biography. As Diogo Barbosa Machado indicates, João Mendes da Silva was born in Rio de Janeiro, the son of André Mendes da Silva and Maria Henriques (1759: IV, 168). Other scholars such as João Lúcio de Azevedo (1932: 149) added new data about his parents: André, the father, was a merchant from Alentejo—born in Crato in 1624, according to Alberto Dines (1992: 175)—while his mother came from Lisbon. Their journey to Brazil occurred in the mid-sixteenth century (*ibid.*). As for this date of birth, it should be placed around 1656, if we admit that Barbosa was correct in saying that he died at the age of 80, on January 9, 1736. Alberto Dines (*ibid.*) corrected this date once and for all, when he found that the birth of the father of António José took place on July 4, 1659, as recorded in the baptismal register of the parish of Candelária, Rio de Janeiro.

The author of the *Bibliotheca Lusitana* says that he studied humanities at the local Jesuit college where he obtained a Master of Arts degree. Later on, he went to Coimbra in 1685—aged 26 and something unusual and as yet unexplained—, where he obtained a degree in Canon Law six years later (Morais, 1949: 47). Upon his return to Brazil, he was appointed Crown Prosecutor in 1698, remaining at this position until his imprisonment (Dines, 1992: 458). According to José Maurício Saldanha Álvarez (2006), one of his duties was to prevent planters from inflicting cruel punishments on their slaves, something that would have created many problems for him. In the same year, by order of February 15, he was also appointed Procurator of Indians for all the villages of the Recôncavo in the city of Rio de Janeiro (Dine, 1992: 572-3).

On July 25, 1699, he married Lourença Coutinho, who had been born in Rio de Janeiro in 1679 and, according to Claude-Henri Frèches (1982: 19), was the daughter of a local New Christian (*converso*), Baltasar Rodrigues Coutinho, employed as master of sugar mills. Three children were born of this marriage: Baltasar (1700), André (1702) and António José (1705), the future playwright.

¹ One of the first to recognize the value of António José da Silva was Machado de Assis, who wrote about him in the section “Páginas críticas e comemorativas” of the volume entitled *Relíquias da Casa Velha* published in 1906.

João Mendes da Silva's life was interrupted on February 1711. According to Claude-Henri Frèches (1967: 12), on February 20, 1711 Lourença was arrested and four days later he followed suit. Both were accused of being New Christians. Other family members were also involved in the process, and all of them were sent to Lisbon in July of the following year (1712). João Mendes traveled on board the ship *Madre de Deus* and arrived there on October 10, 1712, while Lourença, who did so on the *Nossa Senhora da Candelária*, arrived the next day (Azevedo, 1932: 148).

According to scholars, the origin and possible Jewish practices of the family were less interesting to the inquisitors than their prosperity. This appears to be confirmed by the proceedings themselves. In the case of João Mendes da Silva, Paulo Roberto Pereira says:

Conforme consta no inventário de seus bens confiscados, o cristão-novo fluminense João Mendes, conquanto não fosse dono de engenho, possuía uma partida de cultivo de cana-de-açúcar em São João de Meriti,² no Rio de Janeiro, com escravaria. Já como advogado, era possuidor de grande biblioteca para a época, “que constava de cento e cinquenta e tantos volumes de direito, fora noventa e tantos livros de histórias e curiosidades.” (2007: 21)

After spending a few months in the Inquisition's prison, both were punished in the *auto de fé* of July 9, 1713, held in Lisbon under the direction of Cardinal Nuno da Cunha. They were condemned to abjuration, jail imprisonment, wearing a penitential garment and confiscation of their assets, and were supposed to be released on July 20 (Azevedo, 1932: 157).

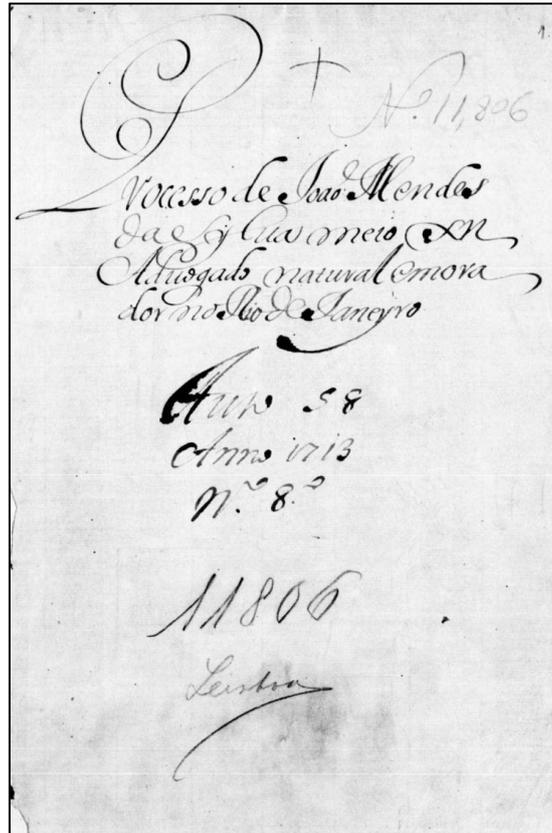
Contrary to what might be expected, some of the family did not return to Rio de Janeiro, and preferred to remain in Lisbon, where João Mendes became an attorney. Oliveira Barata (1998: 63, note), following other scholars, suggests that he did not go after five of his brothers on their return to Brazil for fear of suffering retaliations from the many people he had denounced. The same scholar suggests that doubts about his character could be reinforced by the fact that, shortly thereafter, he became an attorney for the Casa da Suplicação, a higher court also known as Tribunal da Corte.

In any case, the truth is that João Mendes da Silva was not bothered again by the inquisitors, unlike some of his direct relatives. For instance, his wife was arrested again on August 8, 1726 (Baião, 1973: 184), together with her youngest son, António José. This time she was condemned in the *auto de fé* that took place at the church of the convent of Santo Domingo on October 16, 1729. She was banished to exile for a period of three years into the *couto* of Castro Marim (*ibid.*: 185). Years later, she was sentenced again, on this occasion to jail, in an *auto de fé* that took place on October 18, 1739 in the same church. As for António José, his martyrdom occurred in 1739, as it is well known.

Nothing more is known about the biography of João Mendes, except the date of his death, which Barbosa Machado (1759: IV, 168) established on January 9, 1736 in Lisbon, at the age of 77, based on the date of birth provided by Alberto Dines.

As to his literary work, references are scarce, although he was not a completely unknown writer. He is mentioned by the author of the *Bibliotheca Lusitana*, who considers him one “dos mais insignes Poetas do seu tempo, como testemunhão as suas metrificações suaves, cadentes e conceituosas.” Machado adds that Mendes wrote a poem entitled *Fabula de Ero and Leandro* composed in *oitava rima*.

² Alberto Dines says that the property was located in Inhaúma, part of the plantation of his brother-in-law Félix Corrêa de Castro Pinto de Bragança (1992: 408).



Cover sheet of the inquisitorial proceedings of João Mendes da Silva.
Torre do Tombo, TSO, IL, 11806

In a previous article (Topa 2002), I presented a newly-discovered sonnet by Mendes which had been published by our author and included in the prologue to a sermon by Francisco de Matos printed in 1698 (Matos 1698). The Jesuit Francisco de Matos (1636-1720) was a native of Lisbon who became Chancellor of the Jesuit College of Rio de Janeiro and Provincial and Chancellor of the Jesuit College of Bahia, where he died. In that article, I also reproduced 13 previously-unpublished poems by Mendes, together with a commentary on them. The poems were discovered in two miscellaneous manuscripts held at the Biblioteca Pública Municipal do Porto. The poems are varied in form and in tone and range from the encomiastic to the burlesque, from the elegiac to the lyricism *de amore*. These compositions reveal to us more a verse-maker than a true inspired poet.

More recently, I have found another composition that is likely to belong to our author and that could have been composed during his imprisonment by the Inquisition. The poem has been transmitted in several manuscript testimonies, for instance in MS 391 of the Biblioteca Geral da Universidade de Coimbra:

Mote e glosa que fez o Dr. João Mendes estando preso nos cárceres da Inquisição de Lisboa, vendo do seu em um loureiro o pássaro que deu ocasião ao

Mote

*Passarinho que cantais
nesse raminho de flores,
cantai vós, chorarei eu,*

que assim faz quem tem amores.

Doce habitador do vento,
que sois no volátil coro,
não só músico sonoro,
mas também doce instrumento;
suspendei o suave acento
com que a tantos alegrais,
e se atendeis a meus ais,
que nacam de ânsias cruéis,
eu prometo que choreis,
passarinho que cantais.

Vós nesse enfeite de Flora
louvais com doce descante
ao Sol, que parece infante
nos braços da bela Aurora;
contrários somos agora,
pois vós alegre, eu com dores,
eu neste centro de horrores
estou sem cessar chorando,
vós docemente cantando
nesse raminho de flores.

Vós sois o mimo do fado,
eu da fortuna o desprezo,
vós em liberdade e eu preso,
sois feliz e eu desgraçado;
oh que diferente estado
o fado a cada um nos deu!
E assim passarinho meu,
com afeto diferente,
eu penoso, vós contente,
cantai vós, chorarei eu.

Sem dúvida que de outra Ave
namorado estais, que amante
a festejais cada instante
com melodia suave;
pobre de quem neste grave
tormento sente rigores;
cantai pois de amor favores,
que eu chorarei meus azares,
que assim faz quem tem pesares,
que assim faz quem tem amores.

Utilizing with certain ability the traditional motive of directly addressing nature to confront it, the subject regrets his state and sees himself placed in the “centro de horrores” where he is “sem cessar chorando.”

More interesting is a prose composition, whose edition and study I presented in 2014 (Topa, 2014), included in MS 1407 of the Biblioteca Pública Municipal do Porto. The prose composition was supposed to be the answer or solution to a riddle sonnet poem that was very popular in the early years of the 18th century and reads as follows:

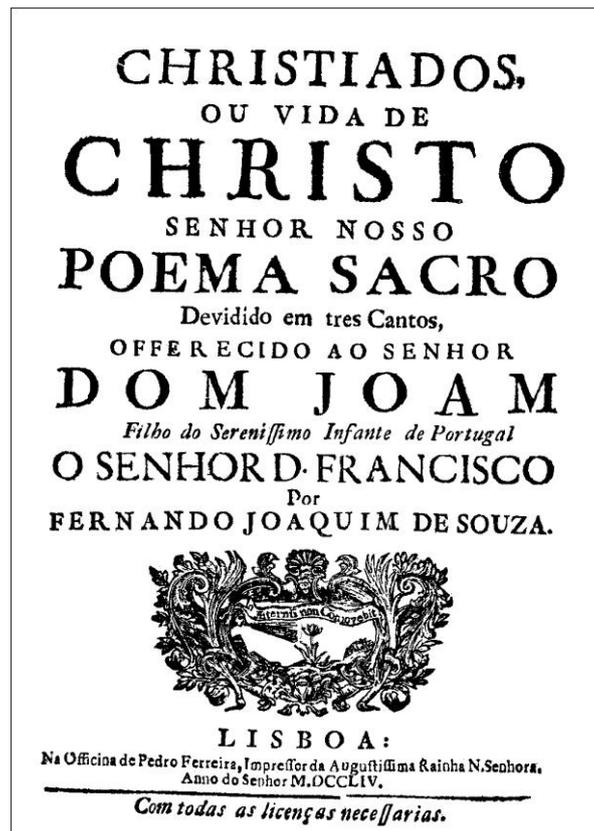
Qual é a cousa no mundo mais amada
que todos em geral aborrecemos?
Todo o bem que nos dá por mal o temos,
e tudo que nos dá redundando em nada.

Do grande e do pequeno desejada,
navegação com velas, mas sem remos;
dos olhos corporais já nunca a vemos,
nem foi de ninguém vista nem achada.

Não é pau, nem é pedra, ar, nem vento,
não é cousa criada nem nascida,
não é memória, voz, nem pensamento;

em cada um de nós anda escondida,
de sorte que sem ela um só momento
não pode conservar-se a própria vida.

Also interesting are his religious poems, the main focus of this article. Barbosa Machado, the first bibliographer to refer to João Mendes da Silva, listed three compositions of this genre, and stated that all of them had been unpublished: the lyric poem *Christiados. Vida de Christo Senhor Nosso* and the verse translations of *Officio da Cruz de Christo* and *Hymno de Santa Barbara*. Later scholars—Inocência Francisco da Silva (1859: II, 273-4), Rubens Borba de Moraes (1969: 363-5) and Alberto Dines (1992: 564-5)—confirmed the authorship of the first text and showed that was published posthumously in 1754, although concealing the identity of the author: the name Fernando Joaquim de Sousa that appears on the title page is but a pseudonym of our Rio attorney.



During my research over the last years, I have been able to locate three handwritten versions of this long poem held respectively at the Biblioteca Pública Municipal do Porto (MS 1412), the Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal (Codex 3086) and the Torre do Tombo (MS 826). More than revealing the relative popularity of the text, these handwritten versions definitively confirm the authorship of António José da Silva's father: although in the last two manuscripts the poem is anonymous, in the miscellany of the Porto library it is attributed to "Dr. João Mendes da Sylva."

As the subtitle states, it is a "Vida de Cristo Redentor Nosso dividida em três partes, que contém os Mistérios Gozosos, Dolorosos e Gloriosos dedicada à Sacratíssima Virgem do Rosário por um seu devoto e indigníssimo servo." Regardless of the possible religious sincerity of the author—which is of little relevance here—, we can see evidence of his great biblical, patristic and liturgical culture and erudition. The quotations from these sources appear as notes placed next to the poetic text as *glossae*, serving as a support for the narrative of Jesus life. Quotes from the Bible, especially from the New Testament, are clearly predominant, but various Latin hymns and liturgical *officia* are also quoted, as are the *Sermons* by St. Peter Chrysologus, the *Confessions* by St. Augustine, the *Homilies* by St. Gregory the Great and even classic authors like Virgil (his *Georgics* and *Aeneid*). The verse technique confirms what we have argued already about his profane poems: João Mendes da Silva is more a verse-maker than a true poet. This can be illustrated by the following passage from the beginning of the Dedicatory:

DEDICATÓRIA

E vós, Divina Senhora,¹⁵
que sois do Verbo encarnado
Virgem Mãe, sem que o fecundo
desfizesse em vós o casto;

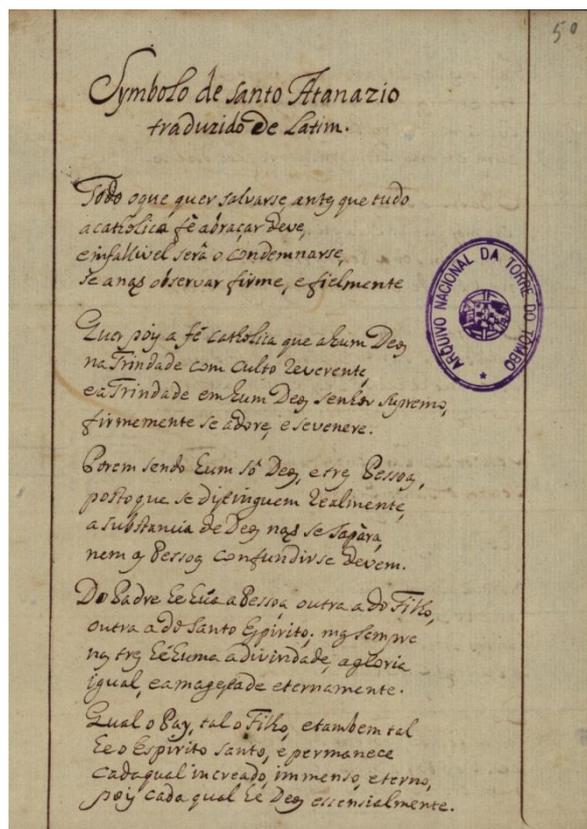
¹⁵ In tuo conceptu, in tuo partu crevit pudor, aucta est. Castitas integritas roborata est et solidata virginitas. D. Chrissol, *Serm. 142 De Anuntiat.*

vós que, admirável prodígio,¹⁶
 vestistes do Sol os raios,
 coroando-vos de Estrelas,
 da lua luzes calçando;

¹⁶ Signum magnum apparuit in caelo, Mulier amicta sole, et luna sub pedibus ejus, et in capite ejus corona stellarum duodecim. Apoc 12:1.

In addition to paying attention to the quotations from the sermons of St. Peter Chrysologus and the Bible, it is worth noting the sonorous and rhythmic fragility of the penultimate line of the first quatrain and the last verse of the second stanza. In any case, if we assume that the work dates from before 1712 and that it was written in the author's city of birth, there are two questions that must be asked: would it be common for a New Christian to have access to this type of Biblical and patristic culture to the degree revealed in *Christiados*? And if so, how? Research on this matter may reveal peculiarities of the survival mode of communities of New Christians in colonial Brazil different from those usually identified or discussed in the customary bibliography.

As for the other religious poems mentioned by Barbosa Machado, it is João Mendes da Silva himself—together with several witnesses—who refers to them during the inquisitorial process: in his words, he was the author of a “Romance devoto á SS.^a Cruz” (fo. 44v), as well as the verse translations of “Lymno [sic] de S.^{ta} Barbara, e o Simbolo de S.^{to} Athanasio, e o off.^o da S.^{ta} Cruz”, “p.^a o uso de sua familia, e parentes, e o deo tãobem a m.^{tas} pessoas estranhas.”



Torre do Tombo, Livraria, Ms. 826, fo. 50r

The hymn and the *officium* are yet to be found. As for the other poem, it appears—along with the *romance* devoted to the Cross—in the manuscript of Torre do Tombo already

mentioned, although without indication of authorship. The Symbol or Creed of Saint Athanasius—also known as *Quicumque*, from the Latin word with which it begins—was very successful in the Latin liturgy although Saint Athanasius was not the author, for it was composed after the 4th century.

Let us now offer a face-to-face comparison of the Latin text with an excerpt from João Mendes da Silva's translation:

Símbolo de Santo Atanásio traduzido de
Latim

Todo o que quer salvar-se, antes que tudo
a católica fé abraçar deve,
e infalível será o condenar-se,
se a não observar firme e fielmente.

Quicumque vult salvus esse, ante omnia
opus est, ut teneat catholicam fidem:
Quam nisi quisque integram inviolatamque
servaverit, absque dubio in aeternum
peribit.

Quer pois a fé católica que a um Deus
na Trindade com culto reverente,
e a Trindade em um Deus senhor supremo,
firmemente se adore e se venere.

Fides autem catholica haec est: ut unum
Deum in Trinitate, et Trinitatem in unitate
veneremur.

Porém sendo um só Deus e três Pessoas,
posto que se distinguem realmente,
a substância de Deus não se separa,
nem as Pessoas confundir-se devem.

Neque confundentes personas, neque
substantiam separantes.

As is readily apparent, the translation is not literal and utilizes more words than the original. Formally speaking, João Mendes uses the so-called heptylasyllabic *romance*, with rhymes in the even-numbered lines.

The other poem is also a heptylasyllabic *romance*, addressed to the “Santíssima Cruz de Cristo Senhor Nosso.” Following prevailing Baroque customary fashion, it begins by defining the sacred wood with a series of metaphors represented by words that begin with the letter “c”. Thus, the beginning is as follows:

Cruz divina, trono excelso,
sanguinilento teatro,
em que o Amor mais peregrino
obrou o extremo mais raro.

Campanha sois onde quis
de Jesus o Amor bizarro
com o fogo do peito e sangue
das veias, vencer contrários.

Cárcere em que por amor
se prendeu Deus humanado,
só porque ficasse livre
da culpa o género humano.

Cadeira adonde ditou

o Mestre mais soberano
da Teologia mais fina
do Amor os pontos mais altos.

At the end of the composition, all these metaphors are gathered together, and the text ends with an appeal to the salvific properties of the cross:

Com que sendo, Cruz Divina,
crisol, cárcere sagrado,
cítara, carta, carroça,
caminho, casa de campo,

canal, costa, corte, cetro,
castelo, cadeira, câmbio,
campanha, catre, clarim,
caráter, cometa fausto,

campo de batalha, centro,
Castor e Pólux sagrados,
chave, enfim, mestra que abristes
a glória ao género humano.

Para nós, sagrado lenho,
sede nossa Luz, amparo,
proteção, socorro, guia
da morte no trance amargo.

Porque abraçados convosco
não temamos perigarmos,
se nos sois Tábua Divina
do mundo em tantos naufrágios.

What can we conclude from these poems? Francisco Adolfo Varnhagen, unfamiliar with the texts, was cautious when wondering

dedicar-se-ia ele, pois, a tais composições, só para que o não perseguissem? É certo que João Mendes morreu advogado da casa da suplicação, quando a mulher e o filho sofriram os tratos dentro da Inquisição. Se as tais obras foram compostas para defender-se das perseguições desta, desculpemos-lhe a hipocrisia; mas cremos que não seriam elas obras de inspiração, porém poesias de cálculo; e em tal caso a perda de tais manuscritos não deve muito lamentar-se. (Varnhagen, 1987: I, 57)

José de Oliveira Barata, who might have read the texts, classified them as “maus versos repassados de ortodoxa religiosidade”, terming them “espectacular”, maybe part of an attempt to convince the inquisitors (1998: 60). Both opinions reflect more an evaluation of the man than of his compositions, one being discreetly criticized for the alleged lack of sincerity of the other. This attitude seems to reveal certain inability to understand both the nature of poetry and the situation of Jews in the Portuguese-Brazilian world of the early 18th century.

While it is true that his poetry is not always endowed with the best quality, its rejection as a whole might reveal the same prejudice and arrogance that condemns Portuguese-Brazilian

literary Baroque *in totum*. At the very least, this poetry is a valid cultural testimony (literary and Catholic), regardless of whether it shows sincere faith or not, which should bear no relevance to our critical estimation of João Mendes da Silva. Finally, it represents a sad page of the Portuguese-Brazilian history that cannot be ignored.

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