


Resenha Crítica

GAMA, José Basílio da. *As Minas de Ouro do Brasil. Brasilienses Aurifodinae*. Tradução e organização Alexandra de Brito Mariano. São Paulo: Edusp, 2024.

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Basílio da Gama is a constant figure in the Brazilian literary canon, largely due to the nationalistic interpretations of his epic poem *O Uruguay*, which have shaped much of the discourse around his work.¹ It might seem surprising, then, to associate him with Latin literature. However, like many of his contemporaries, Gama was a multilingual poet, writing in Portuguese, Italian, and Latin.² One of his only two known Latin works³ and the longer one, *Brasilienses Aurifodinae*, places him firmly in the tradition of Neo-Latin poetry. Until recently, this 1,832-line hexameter poem was known only through a single manuscript. This changed this year with the publication of a 392-page edition by Alexandra de Brito Mariano, Assistant Professor at the University of Algarve. The volume includes a full edition and Portuguese translation of Gama's brief preface, the poem itself, the *Appendix Compendiaria*, the *Quaestio Curiosa*, and the *Index Rerum Notabilium*. Illustrations from the manuscript are also included. It features an introduction by the translator and one by Vania Pinheiro Chaves, Professor Emerita at the University of Lisbon, and a concluding study, "Basílio da Gama e o Ouro das Minas Gerais," by Junia Ferreira Furtado, Professor Emerita at UFMG and the University of Lisbon.

The publication of *Brasilienses Aurifodinae* is a landmark moment for Neo-Latin studies and for the area of Brazilian Literature. Up to now, the poem had been fully translated only in Mariano's dissertation (2005), which is not available online; and some parts of it

had been translated and commented on by João Antonio Lourenço Gonçalves, in his M.A. thesis of 1992, a work on which Mariano seems to have leaned heavily upon for her own. This edition however, widely available in bookstores, reclaims the poem's place in the literary history of the Americas and contributes to the ongoing reassessment of what should be included in the category of Colonial Brazilian Literature—a contested term still in search of a suitable replacement.⁴ The volume itself is beautifully designed, with features that underscore its aesthetic value. The dust jacket is adorned with illustrations from the manuscript, and the hardcover reproduces the manuscript's first folio. The careful use of high-quality paper to differentiate between the scholarly studies and the translation, as well as the superb facsimiles of the manuscript, further elevate the edition's presentation. There are minor errors in the text, and even those (e.g., *veterque* in verse 1439 should be *uterque*, and *coeli* in the footnote to page 46 should be *coelis*) appear to be production-stage mistakes, not editorial oversights.

Yet despite the care taken in the physical presentation of this edition, as a scholar of Neo-Latin literature, I found the content itself less precise. My concerns focus primarily on two aspects: the technical errors in the translation and the lack of attention to the poem's literary qualities and cultural context. Although Mariano has worked on this text for two decades, starting with her 2005 PhD dissertation, numerous misreadings from her earlier work persist in this edition. For instance, in verse 570, *rei* is incorrectly translated as if it were *res*, when it is a form of *reus*. In verse 767, *quare* is rendered as if it were *quare*, and in verse 1230, *nititur* is taken as a form of *niteo* rather than *nitor*. Similarly, verse 698 misinterprets *pluris* as not being in the genitive of price, resulting in a translation that misses the author's intent. There are also frequent instances where *licet* as a conjunction is translated as a verb. These examples are part of a broader pattern of translation errors that sometimes alter the meaning of passages.

Compounding these technical issues is a lack of clarity in the editorial approach. Mariano opts to preserve the manuscript's original punctuation and spelling, making the edition resemble a diplomatic one, but other editorial choices seem inconsistent. The diacritics, which were frequent and useful in the original text, are removed. Enclitics, which were separated in the manuscript, are merged. Abbreviations, some of which might be obscure to readers, are not developed. These decisions do not form a coherent editorial strategy, and a fully diplomatic edition might have been more appropriate given the number of unexplained alterations.

One of the biggest challenges for any translator of *Brasilienses Aurifodinae* lies in its blend of classical Latin and the language of the 18th-century. Gama's poem engages not only with classical Latin authors like Vergil, Ovid, and Horace, but also with contemporary

scientific and literary works on various subjects. Many of these terms are not found in standard Latin dictionaries, which tend to focus on earlier periods. For instance, in verse 66, the phrase *Senenses rivos* refers to the *Rios de Sena*, a captaincy in Mozambique, but Mariano mistranslates this as *ancient rivers*. Similarly, in verses 1111-1116, *sodalitiis* should be translated as *confrarias* (brotherhoods), but Mariano translates it as *companheiros* (companions), and *sacellis* should be *capelas* (chapels), not *pequenos santuários* (small shrines). These mistranslations are not just errors in word choice—they represent a misunderstanding of the poem’s historical and cultural context.

Perhaps more concerning than these technical issues is the edition’s lack of engagement with the poem’s literary qualities. While *Brasilienses Aurifodinae* is undeniably embedded in the socio-political realities of the Portuguese empire, it is also a highly stylized piece of Neo-Latin poetry. The poem’s metrics, rhetorical devices, and intertextual references to classical authors are essential to understanding its artistry. However, the work does not fully engage with these aspects of the text. The introduction devotes thirteen pages to technical explanations of mining, largely repeating what the poem describes, but offers little analysis of the poem’s literary or poetic techniques. Gama’s influences beyond Vergil and Ovid, such as Statius, Claudian, and Silius Italicus, are left unexplored, and there is no discussion of how the poetic form mediates Gama’s representation of mining life in Brazil.

Moreover, Mariano’s focus on historical accuracy leads to a reductive reading of the poem. She asserts that Gama is attempting to “faithfully reproduce” (p. 43, “de maneira pormenorizada e fidedigna”) the realities of gold mining in Brazil, but this overlooks the poetic mediation inherent in his writing. Gama, like many Neo-Latin poets, uses a mix of classical and vernacular references to create a richly layered text that reflects both the New World and the classical tradition. His use of words from Portuguese and Tupi, for example, is not a sign that Latin was inadequate to describe the Brazilian reality, as Mariano suggests (p. 41), but a common practice among Neo-Latin writers dealing with flora, fauna, and social structures of the Americas. Gama even adapts these vernacular terms to fit the constraints of Latin hexameter, yet this goes unnoticed in the volume.

The edition also misses opportunities for deeper engagement with the socio-political realities of Gama’s time. While the introduction acknowledges Gama’s involvement in contemporary scientific debates, it does not fully explore how his status as a subject of the Portuguese crown influenced his depiction of issues such as slavery. Mariano takes Gama at face value when he describes the miners’ willingness to pay taxes (verses 1743-4) or the leisure time granted to slaves, without offering a critical analysis of these claims. The

portrayal of the “good” Christian slave owner, for example, is presented without any consideration of the oppressive realities of the colonial system.

Lastly, the edition does not engage with recent scholarship. While it is based on Mariano’s 2005 dissertation, the nearly two decades since its completion have seen significant developments in both Neo-Latin and Brazilian Colonial studies.⁵ However, the edition cites almost no scholarship published after 2003, aside from Mariano’s own work. This lack of engagement with current research is a missed opportunity to place *Brasilienses Aurifodinae* within broader scholarly debates, particularly regarding the presence of Latin in the Americas.

In conclusion, while this long-awaited edition brings much-needed attention to Gama’s overlooked Latin poem and is visually impressive, its scholarly value is diminished by translation errors, a limited understanding of the poem’s literary nature, and an outdated engagement with the relevant scholarship. It is, however, an invitation for further study and a stepping stone toward a fuller understanding of this important text.

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Notes

1

For a discussion on the anachronistic bases on which much of the 18th century poetry has been read, cf. Chauvin (2023).

2

For more information on the publications and their timeline, cf. Anjos (2019, 2021); Nascimento (2024).

3

This was the only one known until recently, but a second, short poem has been discovered. Publication about it is forthcoming.

4

This discussion is summarized by Lachat, Chauvin (2022).

5

Just as an example, we could cite the momentous fact that many of the most important editorial houses in Europe and the USA have started collection and published companions or other reference works on Neo-Latin in the last two decades. Cf. as a single example, Knight, Tilg (2015). As to Brazilian or Portuguese-American scholarship, besides those already cited here, we could point to Luz (2013) as a good start.



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