



The Motif of Freedom, Human Dignity, and Awareness of a Common Human Destiny between Antiquity and Cervantes

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The legacy of classical antiquity presents a constituent part of Cervantes' opus. The vicinity of the classical imaginarium, with which Cervantes became acquainted at school and while living in Italy, is patent in using ancient elements, topics, and motifs, establishing a constant dialogue with the Ancients. In *Don Quixote* part 1, chapter 11, for example, he offers the reader an image of the ancient Golden Age, as created by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, when writing about the four ages of humankind:

Dichosa edad y siglos dichosos aquellos a quien los antiguos pusieron nombre de dorados, y no porque en ellos el oro, que en esta nuestra edad de hierro tanto se estima, se alcanzase en aquella venturosa sin fatiga alguna, sino porque entonces los que en ella vivían ignoraban estas dos palabras de *tuyo* y *mío*. Eran en aquella santa edad todas las cosas comunes: a nadie le era necesario para alcanzar su ordinario sustento tomar otro trabajo que alzar la mano y alcanzarle de las robustas encinas, que liberalmente les estaban convidando con su dulce y sazonado fruto.¹

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¹ Pérez López, *Cervantes: Don Quijote*, 89.

In creating the image of prehistoric Arcadia, Cervantes reverts to the images and expressions already used by Ovid. To quote some of them:

*Aurea prima sata est aetas ...
ipsa quoque immunis rastroque intacta nec ullis
saucia vomeribus per se dabat omnia tellus.
contentique cibus nullo cogente creatis ...
et quae deciderant patula Iovis arbore glandes.*²

Golden was that first age ...
The earth herself, without compulsion, untouched by hoe
or plowshare, of herself gave all things needful. And men,
content with food which came with no one's seeking ...
and acorns fallen from the spreading tree of Jove.

There are further connections to Vergil's descriptions of the elementary eras of humankind, from the first book of *Georgics*:

*Ante Iovem nulli subigebant arua coloni:
ne signare quidem aut partiri limite campum
fas erat; in medium quaerebant, ipsaque tellus
omnia liberius nullo poscente ferebat.*³

Before the reign of Jove no tillers subjugated the land:
even to mark possession of the plain or apportion it by
boundaries was sacrilege; man made gain for the common
good, and Earth of her own accord gave her gifts
all the more freely when none demanded them.

Another testimony to the traces of classical antiquity, one due to which the reader could expect the incorporation of ancient motifs almost a priori, is often merely the choice of the topic itself. This can go back to the beginnings of Roman presence on the Pyrenean peninsula. A case in point is the legendary story in Numancia.

NUMANCIA

According to Canavaggio, *Numancia* is the only authentic tragedy originating from 16th-century Spain – although its author never

2 *Met.* 1.89, 101–103, 106; translated by Frank Justus Miller and G. P. Goold.

3 *Georg.* 1.125–28; translated by H. Rushton Fairclough, revised by G. P. Goold.

considered it a tragedy. Instead, Cervantes denoted it as “comedy” because tragedy for him did not represent a particular genre, “at the outmost a singular expression of an eclectic *genus dramaticum*, which may include any type of performance in the form of dialogues.”⁴ It was only neo-classicists at the end of the 18th century who classified it as a tragedy.

In this work, Cervantes stages a historically attested event involving the destiny of a Celtiberian town of Numancia, besieged by Scipio’s troops in the year 133 BC, and the resistance of its inhabitants, who sacrificed their lives rather than accepting a defeat. After the final expulsion of the Cartagenans from the Iberian Peninsula, the Romans established two provinces in Hispania in 197 BC, namely Hispania Citerior or Tarraconensis and Hispania Ulterior. In the beginning, they covered a relatively tiny part of the peninsula. However, the Hispanic population was quite defiant, and there were riots. Although Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, father of the brothers Gracchus, achieved peace in 179, the locals rose again in 154. Numancia resisted for nine years. Its allies opted for peace with Rome after another, and Numancia was left alone. Finally, in 133, it was occupied by Scipio Aemilianus. This was the finale of the chapter on the Hispanic wars.

It seems that Cervantes saw *Numancia* as an experiment, an attempt to create a more erudite, higher theater. Indeed, its elevated tone, flowery language, nationally-tinged theme, and tragic end – when young Bariato throws himself from the tower rather than handing over the city’s keys – are reminiscent of classical tragedies.

However, the motifs in Cervantes are unique. The ancient sources of these motifs – Aeschylus, Epictetus, Seneca, Horatio, Virgil – are diverse and specific. They also come from different genres, including Greek historical tragedy, lyric poetry, and Roman tragedy. One of the characteristics of Cervantes’ use of motifs, rooted in antiquity and employed in *Numancia*, is that he does not use simple mythological motifs, omnipresent in the baroque era. These would be immediately obvious to any reader with a classical background. However, he reaches further and deeper by weaving a complex web of motifs.

Cervantes was aware of the intertextuality of his works. He mentioned it by using an outside view in *Adjunta al Parnaso*, among the advice sent to the poet by Apollo from Delphi through Pancracio de Roncesvalles:

4 Canavaggio, *Historia de la literatura española*, 2.225.

Ítem, se advierte que no ha de ser tenido por ladrón el poeta que hurtare algún verso ajeno y le encajare entre los suyos, como no sea todo el concepto y toda la copla entera, que en tal caso tan ladrón es como Caco.⁵

Aurora Egido⁶ believes that Cervantes, “when using words or sentences of certain authors, without mentioning their name, was appealing to the cooperation of the readers or the audience, who were delighted when they recognized a quote and its author.” Such agreement between the dramatist and the audience establishes a play of identification. This is an additional element of entertainment, because “the spectacle event of the Golden Age, which is multifaceted and diverse, elitist and popular, sophisticated and ordinary, religious and secular, is intended for a very heterogeneous audience.”⁷ Spanish dramatists of the baroque period – especially after the revolutionary appearance of Lope de Vega – thus had to consider two types of audiences attending the performance: the uneducated and the more refined public. For each of the two, they had to use attractive elements to create their vision, their performance version. A common denominator included notable quotes and allusions from famous authors and mythological elements, folk motifs, legends, tales, romances, biblical motifs, elements from the Byzantine, and chivalric novels and archetypes.

MOTIF OF FREEDOM AND HUMAN DIGNITY

However, the humanistic note in the work of Cervantes is most noticeable in his constant defense of freedom and human dignity – or the value of the human being in itself, according to the Renaissance concept.⁸ According to Rey Hazas,⁹ freedom becomes a key element and cornerstone of Cervantes’ poetics. This is the link to the Renaissance tradition, extending from Fernán Pérez de Oliva and his disquisition *Diálogo de la dignidad del hombre* (before 1531) to the Renaissance Italian thought on human dignity and freedom. This included *De dignitate et excellentia hominis libri iv* by Giannozzo Manetti (1452)

5 Cervantes, *Viaje del Parnaso*, 147.

6 Egido, *Especial Cervantes*, 18.

7 Kalenić Ramšak, *Hispanistična razpotja*, 4.

8 Abellán, *Historia del pensamiento español*, 240.

9 Hazas, *Cervantes*, 369.

and *Oratio de hominis dignitate* by Pico della Mirandola (1486), two thinkers who established the canon of this topic.¹⁰

Of course, the Renaissance thought on freedom was not a *creatio ex nihilo*. Instead, it represents a link in the tradition of previous discussions and derives from the central idea of Epictetus. The thinking of this Greek philosopher (50–138 AD), a former slave and exponent of late Stoicism, was rooted in freedom.¹¹ His freedom “is not subject to any constraint or obstacle,”¹² and the basis of his teaching on freedom is linked with human dignity, which cannot be influenced by any circumstance or other human being. In his *Diatribes on freedom*,¹³ Epictetus discusses the vanity of victory over somebody or a person’s capture if the defeated individual resorted to death, which accorded him the final victory:

For this reason, we shall say that those animals only are free, which can not endure capture, but as soon they are caught, they escape from captivity by death. So Diogenes also somewhere says that there is only one way to freedom, and that is to die content: and he writes to the Persian king, “You can not enslave the Athenian state any more than you can enslave fishes.” “How is that? Can not I catch them?” “If you catch them, they will immediately leave you, as fishes do,” says Diogenes. “For if you catch a fish, it dies; and if these men that are caught shall die, of what use to you is the preparation for war?”

This thought keeps reverberating in the words of the Cervantes’ character Bariat in the closing speech to his countrymen before he pushes himself to death:

Yo os aseguro, ¡oh fuertes ciudadanos
que no falte por mí intención vuestra
de que no triunfen pérfidos romanos,
si ya no fuere de ceniza nuestra.¹⁴

After this heroic and dignified act of liberation, the apparent winner Scipio (or Cipión) realizes the following, almost in resignation:

- 10 For the seminal study on this topic, see Forcione, *Cervantes and the Humanist Vision*.
- 11 Senegačnik, “Veličina in nemoč Epiktetove svobode,” 183.
- 12 Ibid., 184.
- 13 Epict., *Diatr.* 4.1; English translation by George Long.
- 14 Marrast, *Cervantes: Numancia* 2385–88.

Tú sólo me has llevado la ganancia
de esta larga contienda, ilustre y rara.
Lleva, pues, niño, lleva la ganancia
y la gloria que el cielo te prepara,
por haber, derribándote, vencido
al que, subiendo, queda más caído.¹⁵

The curtain over the fallen Numancia, which nonetheless rose over the Romans in victory, is dropped by personified Fame. Fame praises the Numancians with her poem and humiliates the Romans:

Alzad, romanos, la inclinada frente,
llevad de aquí este cuerpo, que ha podido
en tan pequeña edad arrebatáros
el triunfo que pudiera tanto honraros.¹⁶

The desires of Spain come true and in act one, Spain appears as the personified homeland of the Numancians. Crowned by the towers, holding a castle in one hand, it finally makes a wish:

¡oh, si saliesen sus intentos vanos,
y fuesen sus quimeras desatinos,
que esta pequeña tierra de Numancia,
sacáse de su pérdida ganancia!¹⁷

This short excursus can provide a starting point for further exploration of Renaissance thought. According to Pico della Mirandola, the highest human dignity and true “excellence of human nature” are not in particular human characteristics or abilities. Neither are they in the human, of whom there is nothing more miraculous, being “the bond of the world,” according to Marsilio Ficino. Higher than man’s role in creation is the freedom of man to choose his role. Humans are not pre-defined; they are given free will, comparable to the freedom of God at creation. Pico della Mirandola says that a man is created in the image of God primarily because God, in his “unattainable generosity,” rewarded the man with “miraculous happiness” so that “his gift is to be able to have what he wants and to be what he wants to be.”¹⁸

15 Ibid., 2411–16.

16 Ibid., 2421–24.

17 Marrast, *Cervantes: Numancia* 397–400.

18 Senegačnik, *Giovanni Pico della Mirandola*, 5–7.

Fernán Pérez de Oliva (1493–1531) captures this thought on human freedom and free will as follows:

Porque como el hombre tiene en sí natural de todas las cosas, así tiene libertad de ser lo que quisiere: es como planta o piedra puesto en ocio; y si se da al deleite corporal es animal bruto; y si quisiere es ángel hecho para contemplar la cara del padre; y en su mano tiene hazerse tan excelente que sea contado entre aquellos a quien dixo Dios: *dioses sois vosotros*. De manera que puso Dios al hombre acá, en la tierra, para que primero muestre lo que quiere ser, y si le plazan las cosas viles y terrenas, con ellas se queda perdido para siempre y desamparado; mas si la razón lo ensalça a las cosas divinas, o al deseo dellas y cuidado de gozarlas, para él están guardados aquellos lugares del cielo que a ti, Aurelio, te parescen tan ilustres.¹⁹

Así que esta incertidumbre en que Dios puso al hombre responde a la libertad del alma: unos quieren vestir lana, otros lienço, otros pieles; unos aman el pescado, otros la carne, otros las frutas. Quiso Dios cumplir la voluntad de todos haziéndolos en estado en que pudiesen escoger, y pues es así, no devemos tener por aspereza lo que Dios nos concedió como a hijos regalados.²⁰

The works of Pérez de Oliva, who died unexpectedly at a relatively young age, were published after his death by his nephew, the humanist Ambrosio de Morales. They were published in Córdoba in 1586. Therefore, one can assume that Cervantes, who, due to his difficult financial situation, worked as a court employee precisely in Seville in Andalusia from 1587 to 1600, collecting cereal and oil in the villages of Andalusia, was familiar with *Dialogue on the Dignity of Man* by Pérez de Oliva.

Cervantes frequently expresses the premise of human freedom and its fundamental value in his literary work. For example, in *Don Quixote*,²¹ the knight of the sad countenance says to Sancho:

La libertad, Sancho, es uno de los más preciosos dones que a los hombres dieron los cielos; con ella no pueden igualarse los tesoros que encierra la tierra ni el mar encubre; por la libertad, así como

19 Cerron Puga, *Pérez de Oliva*, 143–44.

20 Ibid., 151

21 Pérez López, *Cervantes: Don Quijote* 2.58.

por la honra se puede y debe aventurar la vida, y, por el contrario, el cautiverio es el mayor mal que puede venir a los hombres.²²

The ideal of freedom accompanied Cervantes from the beginning of his writing to the end of his life. In his first work, the pastoral novel *Primera parte de la Galatea*, published in 1584,²³ Gelisia sings a sonnet with the following closing lines:

Del campo son y han sido mis amores;
rosas son y jazmines mis cadenas;
libre nascí, y en libertad me fundo.²⁴

Cervantes reverts to the same theme in his last work, just before his death. In the adventurous novel inspired by the Hellenistic novel *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda*, Taurisia says:

Libre pensé yo que gozara de la luz del sol en esta vida, pero engañóme mi pensamiento, pues me veo a pique a ser vendida por esclava: desventura a quien ninguna puede compararse.²⁵

This pronounced orientation toward freedom may be related to Cervantes' personal experience and partly explained by his painful captivity in Algeria, where he spent five years. These years "essentially marked his character and perhaps also contributed to his realization that the literature shall change his fate."²⁶ He started to write to survive and maintain clarity of mind and spirit.²⁷

MOTIF OF A HEROIC CITY AND AWARENESS OF A COMMON DESTINY

One ancient parallel, however, is impossible to overlook. War is the core conflict in three of the oldest preserved tragedies by Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*, *The Persians*, and *The Suppliants*.²⁸ In *The Persians*, the only preserved historical drama from antiquity, Aeschylus focuses on the aggressors' human destiny upon facing the defeat incurred by the

22 Sevilla Arroyo, *Cervantes: Obras completas*, 137b.

23 Kalenić Ramšak, "Cervantes," 100.

24 Sevilla Arroyo, *Cervantes: Obras completas*, 137b.

25 Pérez López, *Cervantes: Don Quijote*, 134.

26 Kalenić Ramšak, "Cervantes," 97.

27 For a discussion on Cervantes and the literature of war, see Rupp, *Heroic Forms*.

28 Gantar, *Ajshil*, 8–9.

Greeks as the defenders of freedom, who are kept in the background of the tragedy. The stasima of the choir end in realizing a common human destiny, awaiting the winners and the losers. It seems that not only their countrymen's choir is singing to the Persians. Their mourning turns into a reminder and a warning to themselves, coming from the mouth of the Athenians:

Pour the deep sorrows of my soul; ...
Lamenting my misfortunes; beat thy breast, ...
Answer my grief with grief!²⁹

This motif of awareness of common human destiny is also present in *Numancia*. The words of the Romans sound similarly sinister and not at all triumphant:

Todos son muelos ya: solo uno
creo que queda vivo, para el triunfo darte ...³⁰

It seems that the eyes of Scipio are starting to see the defeat into which the apparent victory against the stubborn Hispanici is turning, as a warning invoking a similar tragedy waiting for the Romans in the future. Thus both works, *The Persians* and *Numancia*, are a collective tragedy – and in each case, the main protagonist a community, facing its destiny.

29 Aeschylus, *Persae* 54–55, translated by Robert Potter.

30 Marrast, *Cervantes: Numancia* 2321–22.

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ABSTRACT

The Motif of Freedom, Human Dignity, and Awareness of a Common Human Destiny between Antiquity and Cervantes

The legacy of antiquity forms a constituent part of Cervantes' opus. The vicinity of the classical imaginarium, with which Cervantes became acquainted during his education and while living in Italy, is represented by classical elements, topics, and motifs. Through these, he establishes a constant dialogue with antiquity. However, the humanistic note in his opus is most noticeable in his constant defense of freedom and human dignity and the value of the human being, reflecting the Renaissance concept of the human person. Freedom becomes a key element and cornerstone of Cervantes' poetics, linking to the Renaissance tradition. Cervantes frequently expresses the premise of human freedom and its fundamental value. This pronounced orientation toward freedom may be related to his personal experience and explained by his painful captivity in Algeria, where he spent five years. He started to write to survive and maintain clarity of mind and spirit.

KEYWORDS: ancient literature, humanism, Spanish literature, Golden Age, *Numancia*, classical reception

Motiv svobode, človekovega dostojanstva in zavedanja skupne človeške usode od antike do Cervantesa

IZVLEČEK

Cervantesu antični klasiki niso bili tuji, z njimi se je seznanil v času šolanja in med bivanjem v Italiji. Da mu je bil klasični svet blizu, dokazuje z vpletanjem antičnih elementov, snovi in motivike. Humanistična nota v njegovem delu je najbolj opazna v nenehni obrambi svobode in človeškega dostojanstva oziroma vrednosti človeškega bitja samega po sebi v skladu z renesančnim konceptom človeka. Svoboda kot ključni pojem in temelj Cervantesove poetike navezuje njegov opus na renesančno tradicijo. Premiso o človekovi svobodi in njeni temeljni vrednosti Cervantes izrazi na številnih mestih. Cervantesovo izrazito usmerjenost k svobodi in prežetost njegovega dela z njo pa je treba razumeti tudi skozi njegovo osebno izkušnjo in mučno ujetništvo v Alžiru, kjer je preživel pet let. Da bi preživel ter ohranil bistrost duha in razuma, je začel pisati.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: antična književnost, humanizem, španska književnost, zlata doba, *Numancia*, klasična recepcija