Early Influences: Judeo-Christian and Greek Roots

What is the historical significance of the classical Greek view that the world is a problem to be understood?

I stare out at a war-torn village across the chilly Pontic Sea, it has been this way for nearly a century and a half. Yet really for more than a few centuries pirates and navies have pulled into this port, called Sevastopol now, to gather their loot. Not to say that my adopted home hasn't seen its share of man-made disasters, but Constanta remains the sleepy backwater as it was more than 2000 years ago when I arrived. Ah Rome, how much you did me wrong by casting me out to this isolated fringe, although a poet like myself had little use for the empire you became. And now look, my eternal rest is in *Roma*nia while the "eternal city" has shrunk to the size the Capitoline Hills, overshadowed by the much smaller Vatican. And now I must cast my eyes further back to the glory that was Greece: the sophistry and mythology that set up humans as one thing, and nature as another. Dear Muses, help old Publius to see through the veil of Time and reveal the so-called Golden Age of Reason.

Bronze, if truth be told, was the age of Homer and his heroes. What stories those bards could tell, centuries before the first stylus scratched out a sentence or stanza, of the gods and goddesses mingling in human affairs. And what affairs they would get up to on their own, Calliope and Clio[[1]](#footnote-1) would whisper to me such outrageous deeds! But most of that changed when those too-clever Ionians started to dig at the surface of the world, looking for the prime element to life; those who, as Aristotle would later say "discoursed on nature" but made no fuss about meter or verse. Blunt logic seems to hold sway amongst these barbarians: "All is water," says one[[2]](#footnote-2). "All is air," says another[[3]](#footnote-3). "Nothing exists but atoms and empty space," says a third, "the rest is opinion."[[4]](#footnote-4) This laughing Thracian was a favourite of mine, how much gossip could be pulled from that chaotic opinion. And then there that weeping sophist, with his “no one steps in the same river twice”[[5]](#footnote-5) who at least gets some credit for situating his argument in nature. When I wrote my *Metamorphoses* I gave these philosophers thanks for all their nothings. But to deny the wonderful world that Nature took care to create around us, misses the most important and most chaotic element of all their archaic thought: change is the only constant worth writing about. Pythagoras seems to understand, and if I could riddle out his equations and golden rules, there would be a better sense of the transmigration of our souls. But then this fellow Socrates comes along, changing all the rules, prattling on and on about the "forms" and not even bothering to write any of his ideas down. It wouldn't have been so bad if he could sing like heroic Homer, but instead he makes the blind bard an enemy of the state, that silly Republic of his. All this leading up to his pupil's pupil's pupil[[6]](#footnote-6) trying to pass himself off as a Philosopher King and creating his empire instead.

When I wrote my first bestseller, the book about jilted lovers of so many dashing Greek heroes and demigods,[[7]](#footnote-7) it was my attempt to connect back to the nature goddesses and mysteries of the East. This to me seemed the real story, and how many men (whose minds were either chasing after the philosophical empiricism, knowing the world, or just plain empire, owning the world) missed out upon this deeper truth: we have as much power to create as to destroy. With my pen, I wrote an entire cosmos into being, from the very beginning of creation[[8]](#footnote-8) to the ascension of that Alexandrian pretender Caesar.[[9]](#footnote-9) What thanks do I get but exile from my home due to some sticky situation with Caesar’s adopted nephew![[10]](#footnote-10) More pirates and pillagers, who would eventually burn down the Great Library and most of my precious volumes - those that had not been heavily censored in my lifetime. But I could look ahead, from my grave in far-flung Tomis, to an age of rebirth in my too-often troubled land: the Italian Renaissance they call it. The only ones who see the world as a problem are usually the ones holding the torches, not the pens.

1. Muses of epic poetry and history, respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thales of Miletus [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Anaximenes of Miletus [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Democritus of Abdera [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Heraclitus of Ephesus [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Plato was one of Socrates' students, and taught philosophy to Aristotle, who then tutored Alexander the Great. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Epistulae Heroidum* or *the Heroides* (c. 25 - 16 BCE) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Metamorphoses*, Book I [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. ibid., Book XV epilogue [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Augustus Caesar [↑](#footnote-ref-10)