Gods and Heroes
Ancient Legends in Renaissance Art
Renaissance artists frequently found inspiration in poetry, plays, and historical narratives, endeavoring to bring to life the literary characters and scenes they encountered.

The following eight texts by ancient or Renaissance authors have been selected to create a dialogue between artworks on view in this exhibition and literature known to Renaissance artists and their patrons. Many of the people who first viewed these artworks were probably familiar with the stories and themes in the corresponding texts, and they relied on that knowledge to interpret the artists’ compositions.

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, an epic poem narrating hundreds of ancient legends, was the mythological source that artists most often consulted. Similarly, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, taking place after the fall of Troy, provided a wealth of heroic tales. Renaissance scholars of antiquity followed their ancient predecessors, incorporating Greek and Roman myths, philosophy, and history into their own literary works.

Five centuries ago, Renaissance artists and writers debated whether painting or poetry was the superior form of art. Today, with the passages in this booklet, exhibition visitors are invited to contemplate this question themselves, considering the connected yet different ways that the authors’ choice of words and the artists’ compositions emphasize particular details or generate drama and emotion.

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There is a goddess who walks aloft, floating in empty air. Her loins girded with a cloud, her mantle white, her hair encircled with a crown, she resounds with whirring wings. She subdues the extravagant hopes; she threatens the proud with dangers; to her is given power to crush the arrogant minds and triumphs of men and to confound their too ambitious plans. The ancients called her Nemesis, begotten of Father Ocean out of silent Night. Stars are affixed to her brow; in her hand she carries a bridle and a bowl; always she laughs at that which is awe-inspiring; and she sets her face against and thwarts outrageous undertakings, subduing wicked desires. Exchanging high and low, she mixes and tempers our actions by turns, and she is borne hither and thither by the whirling motion of the winds.

Excerpt from *Manto*, 1480s. Poliziano (Italian, 1454–1494).
See, a pair of serpents with huge coils, snaking over the sea from Tenedos through the tranquil deep (I shudder to tell it), and heading for the shore side by side: their fronts lift high over the tide, and their blood-red crests top the waves, the rest of their body slides through the ocean behind, and their huge backs arch in voluminous folds.

There’s a roar from the foaming sea: now they reach the shore, and with burning eyes suffused with blood and fire, lick at their hissing jaws with flickering tongues.

Blanching at the sight we scatter. They move on a set course towards Laocoön: and first each serpent entwines the slender bodies of his two sons, and biting at them, devours their wretched limbs:

then as he comes to their aid, weapons in hand, they seize him too, and wreathe him in massive coils: now encircling his waist twice, twice winding their scaly folds around his throat, their high necks and heads tower above him.

He strains to burst the knots with his hands, his sacred headband drenched in blood and dark venom, while he sends terrible shouts up to the heavens, like the bellowing of a bull that has fled wounded, from the altar, shaking the useless axe from its neck.

But the serpent pair escapes, slithering away to the high temple, and seeks the stronghold of fierce Pallas, to hide there under the goddess’s feet, and the circle of her shield.

Excerpt from *Aeneid*, about 29–19 BC. Virgil (Roman, 70–19 BC).
So the Earth spoke, and unable to tolerate the heat any longer or speak any further, she withdrew her face into her depths closer to the caverns of the dead. But [Zeus], the all-powerful father of the gods, climbs to the highest summit of heaven, from where he spreads his clouds over the wide earth, from where he moves the thunder and hurls his quivering lightning bolts, calling on the gods—especially on [Helios] who had handed over the sun chariot—to witness that unless he himself helps, the whole world will be overtaken by a ruinous fate. Now [Zeus] has no clouds to cover the earth or rain to shower from the sky. He thundered, and balancing a lightning bolt in his right hand threw it from eye-level at the charioteer, removing him, at the same moment, from the chariot and from life, extinguishing fire with fierce fire. Thrown into confusion, the horses, lurching in different directions, wrench their necks from the yoke and throw off the broken harness. Here the reins lie, there the axle torn from the pole, there the spokes of shattered wheels, and the fragments of the wrecked chariot are flung far and wide.

But Phaeton, flames ravaging his glowing hair, is hurled headlong, leaving a long trail in the air, as sometimes a star does in the clear sky, appearing to fall although it does not fall. Far from his own country, in a distant part of the world, the river god Eridanus takes him from the air, and bathes his smoke-blackened face. There the Italian nymphs consign his body, still smoking from that triple-forked flame, to the earth, and they also carve a verse in the rock:

HERE LIES PHAETON WHO THE SUN’S JOURNEY MADE
DARED ALL, THOUGH HE BY WEAKNESS WAS BETRAYED

Excerpt from Metamorphoses, about AD 8. Ovid (Roman, 43 BC–AD 17).
[Procris] rises, and speeding to her lover’s embrace, stirred with her hurrying frame the leaves that were in her way: he thinking he saw a quarry leapt up with youthful ardor, and his weapon was in his hand.

What dost thou, hapless one? It is no beast: drop your arrow! Woe is me! Thy dart has pierced the maid.

“Alas!” she cries, “thou hast pierced a friendly breast: this spot hath ever a wound from Cephalus. Untimely I die, yet injured by no rival: this will make thee, earth, lie lightly on my bones. Now goes my spirit out upon the air whose name I once suspected: I faint, I die; close my eyes with the hand I love.”

He raises to his sad bosom his lady’s dying form, and laves the cruel wound in tears: her spirit passes, and ebbing little by little from her rash breast is caught upon her unhappy lover’s lips.

Excerpt from *The Art of Love*, about AD 2.
Ovid (Roman, 43 BC–AD 17).
Phoebus, of you even the swan sings with clear voice to the beating of his wings, as he alights upon the bank by the eddying river Peneus; and of you the sweet-tongued minstrel, holding his high-pitched lyre, always sings both first and last.

And so hail to you, Apollo! I seek your favor with my song.

“To Apollo,” from *The Homeric Hymns*. 700–600 BC. Unknown author.
The form of the triumph (which the Romans still continue to employ) was as follows: All who were in the procession wore crowns. Trumpeters led the advance and wagons laden with spoils. Towers were borne along representing the captured cities, and pictures showing the exploits of the war; then gold and silver coin and bullion, and whatever else they had captured of that kind: then came the crowns that had been given to the general as a reward for his bravery by cities, by allies, or by the army itself. White oxen came next, and after them elephants and the captive Carthaginian and Numidian chiefs. Lictors clad in purple tunics preceded the general; also a chorus of harpists and pipers, in imitation of an Etruscan procession, wearing belts and golden crowns, and they march in regular order, keeping step with song and dance. They are called Lydi because, as I think, the Etruscans were a Lydian colony. One of these, in the middle of the procession, wearing a purple cloak reaching to the feet and golden bracelets and necklace, caused laughter by making various gesticulations, as though he were dancing in triumph over the enemy. Next came a number of incense-bearers, and after them the general himself on a chariot embellished with various designs, wearing a crown of gold and precious stones, and dressed, according to the fashion of the country, in a purple toga interwoven with golden stars. He bore a scepter of ivory, and a laurel branch, which is always the Roman symbol of victory.

Excerpt from Roman History, before AD 162. Appian (Roman, about AD 95–165).
[Aeneas] speaks, and now the fire is more audible, through the city, and the blaze rolls its tide nearer.

“Come then, dear father, clasp my neck: I will carry you on my shoulders: that task won’t weigh on me. Whatever may happen, it will be for us both, the same shared risk, and the same salvation. Let little Iulus come with me, and let my wife follow our footsteps at a distance. You servants, give your attention to what I’m saying. At the entrance to the city there’s a mound, an ancient temple of forsaken Ceres, and a venerable cypress nearby, protected through the years by the reverence of our fathers: let’s head to that one place by diverse paths. You, father, take the sacred objects, and our country’s gods, in your hands: until I’ve washed in running water, it would be a sin for me, coming from such fighting and recent slaughter, to touch them.” So saying, bowing my neck, I spread a cloak made of a tawny lion’s hide over my broad shoulders, and bend to the task: little Iulus clasps his hand in mine, and follows his father’s longer strides. My wife walks behind. We walk on through the shadows of places, and I whom till then no shower of spears, nor crowd of Greeks in hostile array, could move, now I’m terrified by every breeze, and startled by every noise, anxious, and fearful equally for my companion and my burden.

Excerpt from *Aeneid*, about 29–19 BC. Virgil (Roman, 70–19 BC).
God has his grace upon him shown,
And then more pious he has grown.
Adept to play in knightly sport,
Thereby in him stood courage and heart
That began while he was still a youth,
And there with greater virtue grew.

Transcription of 16th-century German text:

Got hat sein gnad an im ersaigt
Dann er zu frumkeit was genaigt
Geschickt zu rutterlichen scherz
Darzu stund im sein mut und herz
Das fing er an in seiner jugent
Darin er wuchs mit grosser tugent

Excerpt from Arch of Honor, about 1515–17,
Johann Stabius (Austrian, 1450–1522).
Please return to box.
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