

Ovid's *Heroic Epistles* in a 16th-century woodcut-illustrated edition printed by Alessandro Paganino.

Ovid. *Epistolae Heroidum novissime recognitae aptissimisque figuris exculte*. Impressvm Tvsclani apvd Benacvm : In aedibus Alexandri Paganini, 1525. 8 1/2 inches (220 mm), [2], cxxxviii [i.e. cxxxvii], [1] leaves: ill.

The Roman poet Ovid (45 B.C.–17 A.D.) began his literary career in youth, reciting his *Amores* to the public when barely bearded. After that the chronology of his life and works becomes more sketchy. The *Heroides* or *Heroic Epistles* follow the *Amores* and represent Ovid in his prime. The first 14 epistles are imaginary love letters in elegiac verse from legendary women to their absent husbands or lovers. These include letters from Penelope to Ulysses (illustrated on **Spread 5**), Dido to Aeneas (illustrated on **Spread 43**), Ariadne to Theseus (illustrated on **Spread 60**) and Medea to Jason (illustrated on **Spread 68**). Number 15 is a letter from Sappho to Phaon of uncertain authenticity: it is here printed at the end of the *Heroides* (**Spreads 116–22**). Numbers 16–21 are correspondence, rather than letters in a bottle, with the male initiating and the woman responding. Here, for instance, Paris and Helen correspond (illustrated on **Spreads 83 and 91**) as do Hero and Leander (illustrated on **Spreads 98 and 103**). The volume concludes with *Ibis* (**Spreads 123–41**), a polemical poem addressed to an unknown enemy, suitably introduced by a handsome woodcut of the laureated poet composing, while storks catch vipers to feed their young, and a naked female with pendulous breasts holds up the legend INVIDIA (ordinarily the deadly sin of Envy, but here more properly translated Odium).

The *Heroides* were first published as part of Ovid's collected works in Venice in 1474. The present edition is one of several separate editions of Ovid from the press of Alessandro Paganino in the early 16th century, and printed in his distinctive and beautiful italic type. These include editions of the *Metamorphoses* (1521 and 1526), the *Ars Amandi* or *Art of Love* (1526), the *Tristia* (1526) and the *Fasti* (1521 and 1527). Paganino had published an earlier edition of the *Heroides* in 1515 while still in Venice, with scantier commentary, and another in 1516 that included the *Amores* and several other pieces. Like the *Metamorphoses*, the *Heroic Epistles* offered great pictorial possibilities.

The first illustrated edition was a translation into Italian, published in Naples around 1474. It was followed by some three dozen other illustrated editions before this printing by Paganino: as usual with early woodcuts, there was much copying and imitation. The massive surrounding commentary, assembled from the editions of such celebrated scholars of the previous century as Antonio Volsco, Ubertino da Crescentino, Domizio Calderino and Josse Badius, embraces as it dwarfs the text in the manner of old editions of Gratian or the *Talmud*.

This copy was once owned by James Stevens Cox (1910–97), eccentric British bookseller, antiquary, and hairdresser: his bookplate is at **Spread 2**.