



Margaret, shown deeply in thought, is pointing to the word “demens” (“mad”) in the famously controversial<sup>1</sup> chorus of the fourth act of Seneca’s *Oedipus*. Lines 893-898 are shown on this right-hand side of the page: “...while mad, the lad [Icarus] sought the stars, trusting in new arts, and strove to vanquish true birds in flight; and [demanding too much of his false wings]...”<sup>2</sup> Oedipus is the best known tragic character of classical antiquity. He begins being blind in terms of self-knowledge, and then proceeds “madly”<sup>3</sup> to take out his own eyes once he comes to know himself and his actions for what they are.

The opposite page gives another approach to the troubles that “fate” seems to bring. Using terms from sailing, the Chorus of the play advises: “Were it mine to shape fate at my will, I would trim my sails to gentle winds, lest my yards tremble, bent ’neath a heavy blast.” The Latin gives first place to “fate”:

Fata si liceat mihi  
 fingere arbitrio meo,  
 temperem zephyro levi  
 vela, ne pressae gravi  
 spiritu antennae tremant.  
 lenis et modice fluens  
 aura nec ver...[gens latus]  
 ducat in...[trepidam ratem]....<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For recent commentary of this particular passage, see Jessica Winston, “Seneca in Early Elizabethan England,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 59 (2006): 29-58, esp. 50; Bruce R. Smith, *Ancient Scripts & Modern Experience on the English Stage 1500-1700*, Princeton UP, 1988, 210ff; Frederick Kiefer, *Fortune and Elizabethan Tragedy*, Huntington Library, CA, 1983, 64ff.

<sup>2</sup> On this page, the words of lines 893-898 not covered by Margaret’s hand are:

astra dum **demens** petit  
 artibus fi[sus] novis,  
 certat et ve[r]as aves  
 vince[re ac falsis ni]mis  
 impe[r]at pinnis puer]  
 no[m]en eripuit freto]  
 c[allidus medium senex]....

<sup>3</sup> On line 103 of this play Oedipus refers to his own action as “demens.”

<sup>4</sup> These are lines 882-889. The concluding couplet of this sentence (lines 890-91) not shown in the painting is: “May soft breezes, gently blowing, unvarying, carry my untroubled barque along....”