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Shakespeare's Art of Entanglement: *The Tempest*'s Tragicomic Dramaturgy of Knotting and Untying

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes that via its dense knot imagery and actions of (un)tying knots on stage, *The Tempest* offers metadramaturgic commentary on the playwright's task of (dis)entanglement, the skill of creating and resolving a complex dramatic action. Early modern tragedy and comedy theory derived from Aristotle's *Poetics* helps to understand how Prospero's magically devised play, to a degree congruous with *The Tempest* itself, in its tragicomic mode creates and partly unties an exquisitely tied knot. Rather than pursuing a purely formalist concern, my new formalist reading of *The Tempest* examines how the knot as an image-cluster itself ties together various early modern concerns, such as the knot knowledge of seafaring, the Tudor and Stuart predilection for knot gardens, bondage in the contexts of colonialism and European courts, mutual binding in the imagery of romance and marriage, and the practice of delivery as an untying of the child and its sublimation in discourses of science and magic.

KEYWORDS

Aristotle; knot imagery; virgin knot; marriage knot; labyrinth; new formalism

This article traces *The Tempest*'s interest in tying and untying knots that is set up in its opening storm spectacle and shapes the entire action of the play in a spectrum between concrete stage actions that involve material knots to verbal imagery and the highly symbolic role of knots in Shakespeare's England.[1] In the first scene, the mariners desperately tie and unfasten naval knots when raising and lowering sails, while the King's court party reflects on the probability of survival by considering whether "the rope of […] destiny" (1.1.30) will be tied into a hangman's noose or serve as an anchor to save them. After shipwreck, the passengers find themselves on an island where Prospero's magic binds and unbinds the inhabitants and visitors physically, emotionally, and mentally. He threatens to chain them into "knotty entrails" (1.2.296) and

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[1]This article expands observations made in *Shakespeare's Serial Returns in Complex TV,* in which I compare *The Tempest* and the TV series *Westworld* (Wald 21 81). I would like to thank Juliane Vogel, Tobias Döring, Kent Cart wright, the members of my research colloquium as well as the anonymous peer reviewers for their insightful comments on earlier versions of this article.

with manacles, binds them into a "sad knot" (1.2.225) of mourning, and has their "spirits […] all bound up" (1.2.489) in a trance. As a consequence, the royals feel lost as if erring through a knot garden and so "knit up" (3.3.89) in their desperation that they consider hanging themselves. For Ferdinand and Miranda, the magician conjures up the goddess of marriage ready to use her fetters to tie the marriage knot, but warns the young lovers against breaking the "virgin-knot" (4.1.15) prematurely. Eventually, Prospero decides to "release" (5.1.30), "resolve" (5.1.251), and "untie" (5.1.256) everyone and promises to "deliver all" (5.1.317). Bringing together an inquiry into the cultural meanings of Renaissance knots, performance criticism, and early modern genre theory, this article proposes that via the knot imagery, *The Tempest* offers metadramaturgic commentary on the playwright's task of (dis)entanglement, the skill of creating and resolving a complex dramatic action.

As has long been acknowledged, Prospero's magical orchestration is a metaphor for his dramaturgic and theatrical art.[2] Prospero acts as the "playwright/director" of an action that constitutes large parts of the play (Bruster 257). To a degree, "[t]he plot of *The Tempest* is Prospero's plot" (Fernie 260) and audiences witness both Prospero's engineering of the action and see how his plans play out. At the same time, this configuration makes audiences look out for the limits of Prospero's control and appreciate "all the life in the play that is either thoroughly incidental, indifferent, or even opposed to Prospero's plot" (260). Therefore, the attraction of *The Tempest* for audiences partly stems from the fact that "we're looking simultaneously at two plays, Shakespeare's and the dramatic structure being worked out by Prospero" (Frye 172). This working out, I argue, is presented as a process of tying, knotting, slinging, interweaving, and eventual unravelling. In contrast to Shakespeare's usual open dramaturgy, which hardly ever observes the unities of time and place, *The Tempest* very tightly intertwines five plot strands in an insular microsphere with meticulous, signposted timing of the roughly four hours of action. The disentanglement of this dense knot of intertwined threads of action poses a complex task to audiences, characters, and the on-stage dramatist-figure alike. As Ernest B. Gilman has put it, *The Tempest*'s "dramatic design involves the need closely, even neurotically, to observe the laws of dramatic place and time – it is as if Prospero were somehow aware of the rigid Aristotelian requirements imposed on him by his creator" (100). This article proposes that *The Tempest* not only adheres to what early moderns understood as Aristotelian unities,[3] but that it

[2]See for example K. Berger; Walch; Johnson. A number of critics have also elucidated how *The Tempest* might comment on the concrete theatrical practices of the Globe and the Blackfriars. See Gurr, "Industrious Ariel"; Bruster; Viktus.

[3]As Micha Lazarus has made clear, "the 'unities' (the term dates to Dryden) of place and time are not properly Aristotle's: the *Poetics* is founded on the unity of action, contains some remarks that Scaliger (1484 1558) and others crystallized into the unity of time, and makes no mention at all of a unity of place. Sidney's (1554 1586) take on *Gorboduc* therefore presents a clear case of mediation through Castelvetro's *Poetica d'Ar istotile vulgarrizata e sposta* (1570), in which the unity of place was first articulated".

also reflects on Aristotle's fundamental dramaturgic principles of knotting/slinging (which he calls '*desis*' in the *Poetics*) followed by the denouement (*lysis*) in the finale.[4] Early modern genre theory as worked out in poetologies and plays adopted Aristotle's principles of tragic *desis* and *lysis* to conceptualise the 'knot of errors' typical of comedy, too. I will argue that the principle of (dis)-entanglement therefore provides a particularly useful framework for exploring the tragicomic dramaturgy of *The Tempest*, which raises suspense as to whether the resolution will lead to the catastrophe typical of revenge tragedy or to the reconciliatory resolution of comedy/romance.[5]

My reading of *The Tempest* is part of a recent interest in reassessing the impact that Aristotle's writing might have had on early modern English drama, an attempt to "reconstruct a properly sixteenth-century *Poetics*" (Lazarus), which takes into account the often circumspect ways in which Aristotle's ideas were circulated in early modern England via excerpts, translations, commentaries, prefaces, performances, and play scripts.[6] Rather than pursuing a purely formalist concern, however, this article methodologically brings together formal and cultural analysis in a new formalist reading of *The Tempest*. It argues that *The Tempest*'s dramaturgic self-reflexivity is negotiated via the knot as an image cluster that itself ties together various early modern concerns that arise within the play, such as the knot knowledge of seafaring, the Tudor and Stuart predilection for knot gardens, its widely discussed preoccupation with bondage in the contexts of colonialism and European courts, mutual binding in the imagery of romance and marriage, and the practice of delivery as an untying of the child and its sublimation in discourses of science and magic.

Naval Knots, the Rope of Destiny, *Ploke*, and *Nodus Erroris*

The opening storm, which the magician-playwright-director afterwards presents as an impressive example of his skills, introduces the play's preoccupation with (un)tying in its focus on the practice and the rhetoric of knotted ropes and interwoven threads. With remarkably accurate technical details of seafaring, the

[4]As John Kerrigan has pointed out in his study *Shakespeare's Binding Language*, which explores the performative bindings of vows, oaths, promises, contracts, and spells in early modern plays, "[i]t is not anachronistic to call this untying a denouement, though that word comes into English from French in the mid eighteenth century. *The Oxford English Dictionary* records from Chaucer onwards knot meaning: 'the complication in the plot of a tale or drama'" (333). Kerrigan does not discuss the dramaturgic slingings of *The Tempest*, but one dramaturgic strategy that he identifies in his comparative reading of *Macbeth* and *All's Well,* namely the "concatenation of charm, knot, and plot" (316) returns, with specific differences, in the late play.

[5]While to my knowledge there has never been a discussion of tragic *desis* in *The Tempest*, a number of critics discussed below have looked at the play as modelled on Roman New Comedy and its creation of a 'knot of errors' without paying attention to the play's metadramaturgic self awareness regarding knotting.

[6]As Lazarus elaborates, "One of the persistent misconceptions in the field is that the *Poetics* traveled in books entitled *Aristotelis poetica* or the like, separated from the wider corpus as clearly as we separate it ourselves". See also Sarah Dewar Watson's study on Aristotle's impact on 'Anglo Italian Renaissance genres,' which argues that Shakespeare was an active participant in the critical dialogue with Aristotle's *Poetics* (48 and *passim*).

scene stages the urgent commands of the boatswain – the officer responsible for sails, rigging, and anchor – that the mariners first take in sails to reduce the ship's speed and then set sails again to return to the open sea to avoid crashing on the shore of an island.[7] These feverish attempts to avoid shipwreck involve the tying and untying of naval knots. However, the way in which the scene might have been staged originally in the Globe and the Blackfriars is contested in academic criticism. As Andrew Gurr elaborates in his discussion of first performances of *The Tempest*, which in his estimation took place at the Blackfriars, "the worst uncertainty" regards the use of ropes that are vividly evoked in the dialogue ("*Tempest*'s Tempest" 96). The ropes were either purely imaginary, used by off-stage mariners, or real ropes dangled from the balcony, on which the mariners hauled during the scene (96). While Gurr argues that the minimalist staging is more probable, Pascale Aebischer in her recent study *Shakespeare, Spectatorship and the Technologies of Performance* assumes that ropes were used and that the opening created an immersive theatrical experience, in particular for the gallants who sat directly on the stage: "with the din of thunder above their heads and amid ropes", "sodden sailors brushing pass them […], and possibly even the lowering of a topmast onto the stage […], followed by the rigging of sails", they "must have felt under almost individual physical attack by the performers and their deployment of stage technologies" (72). We know that later productions frequently used rigging and ropes as important props and scenery for the opening (Lindley, "Introduction" 9). Nineteenth-century theatrical realism led to a wealth of productions that staged the emergency seafaring in detail, adding actions like saving a mariner who went overboard by a rope or the desperate attempt to set the anchor (Dymkowski 74). This trend continued well into the twentieth century (75), and also many of the more stylised and minimalist stagings of the twentieth century used ropes and rigging, among them influential productions in England, such as Peter Brook's in Stratford and London in 1957, John Barton's 1970 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company, and Peter Hall's staging at the National Theatre in 1988 (78-79; 113).

In addition to the ropey (off)stage business, the first scene also establishes a rhetorical interest in knotted ropes. Trying to raise the hopes of the court party that they will survive the tempest, Gonzalo comments that the boatswain "hath no drowning mark upon him – his complexion is perfect gallows. Stand fast, good fate, to his hanging; make the rope of his destiny our cable, for our own doth little advantage. If he be not born to be hanged, our case is miserable" (1.1.28-32). Gonzalo here draws on the proverb 'He that is born to be hanged shall never be drowned' (Vaughan and Vaughan 167n28-9; Lindley, "Tempest" 93n25-6). The 'rope of destiny'

[7] Cf. Gwilym Jones's ecocritical reading in the context of Shakespeare's other storm scenes, which emphasises the unusual realism of the opening; "a precision perhaps unmatched in the rest of his work" (130).

that Gonzalo considers more useful than the cable that cannot anchor the ship in the midst of the storm refers to the hangman's rope and/or the thread of life spun by the Fates (Vaughan and Vaughan 167n28-9; Lindley, "Tempest" 93n25-6).[8] The mariners' concrete activities of handling the ropes are thus reflected in a rhetorical preoccupation with equally existential ropes, threads, and knots. While it has long been established that the opening scene's dialogue "initiates important thematic threads" of *The Tempest* (Lindley, "Introduction" 6), for instance regarding social upheaval, this article proposes that the very notion of interwoven, entangled threads is a noteworthy, and as yet little explored, aspect of the play that is set up in the opening's engagement with ropes, naval knots, the hangman's noose, and the Fates' threads. What is more, I will argue that the first scene's cross-overs between the material and the metaphorical as well as between the practice and rhetoric of knotwork are typical of the play's general engagement with the art of entanglement, as *The Tempest* blends early modern practices, verbal imagery, and discourses of (un)binding with the dramaturgic metaphor of (un)tying in a dense aggregate that itself is not easily unravelled.[9]

A number of recent theatrical productions have followed a similar line of thought, as they employed the ropes of the opening scene as a resonant stage image for the ensuing action on the island, thus highlighting *The Tempest*'s interest in the art of entanglement. For instance, the 2011 production of *The Tempest* at the American Shakespeare Center's Blackfriars Playhouse emphasised the close material, rhetorical, and thematic link between the first scene and the following action on the island by having a large white cotton sheet and ship ropes hanging from the balconies to visualise the mariners' struggle to navigate the tempest; in the following encounter between Prospero and Miranda on the shore, Prospero tidied up the ropes (Ray 128). This transition opened up interpretative space for central questions of the play, inviting audiences to wonder whether this is to be understood as a metatheatrical moment, in which Prospero as author/director/stage manager takes care of the theatrical props of the previous scene, whether the ropes ought to be understood as objects of Prospero's magic, indicating that the magician, like a puppeteer, had pulled the strings of the previous storm scene, or whether they are indeed the ropes taken from the King's ship, which was allegedly destroyed but actually brought intact to a safe place by Ariel. The handling of the ropes in this production thus introduced not only the epistemic complexity of the play, but also an overall concern which Catherine Richardson has observed in her study on *Shakespeare and Material Culture*, namely that "Prospero's

[8]As Gurr concedes, Gonzalo's allusion would "gain more pungency if a visible piece of apparatus was dangling like a noose from above" ("*Tempest*'s Tempest" 97).

[9]See Fleming for an account of how writing in early modern England was closely tied to the material, for instance because poems expressed a physical form or because posies were meant to be written on specific surfaces. For a comparable interest in keywords in Shakespeare's plays, see Parker.

whole system of magic becomes a way of dealing with material lack, of surrounding himself with those things which his usurping brother had taken from him" (156). Richardson discusses how the erstwhile 'prosperous,' now impoverished Duke of Milan magically conjures luxury objects in the banquet and masque scenes in order to prove his aesthetic and political authority in the cultural code of the European courts. While Richardson does not discuss the opening storm, the exposition makes clear that ropes also belonged to the things that Prospero's brother deliberately deprived him of. As Prospero relates to Miranda and audiences directly after the opening storm, he and his infant daughter had experienced a storm twelve years earlier on "A rotten carcass of a butt, not rigged, / Nor tackle, sail, nor mast" (1.2.146-47).

In the 2011 Blackfriars production, the theatrical sign of the ropes was thus semiotically complex from the very beginning, and through the dialogue, it was embedded in a wider concern with tying, binding, weaving, and knotting. Even more profoundly, the 2005 *Tempest* at the Globe Theatre in London, which used only three actors for its psychoanalytic exploration of the play, turned the knotted rope into *the* central prop and stage design on an otherwise bare stage. Throughout the play, the rope hung "like a hangman's noose from the heavens", providing versatile symbolic commentary and opportunities for stage action including the binding of particular characters (Vaughan 197). Tim Carroll, the director, has explained in an interview that for the artistic team, the rope is "metaphorical as to Prospero's power. When he gives up power, he gives up the rope" (197). Accordingly, the rope fell lifeless to the stage once Prospero set Ariel free. While it is certainly true that the focus on ropes in recent productions shows that *The Tempest*'s concern with colonialism is "subsumed into larger issues of political oppression", as Virginia Mason Vaughan concludes in her performance history of *The Tempest* (214-15), this article proposes an additional metadramaturgic concern that is negotiated through this visual and verbal imagery of binding and knotting. The material presence of ropes offers an example of how 'vibrant' objects may have functioned on Shakespeare's stage and how they keep signifying in theatrical productions today. As Richardson describes the process of theatrical meaning-making, it "is partly the physical durability of objects which gives them a central function in accumulating and disseminating theatrical meanings. […] They become […] a physical form around which words and ideas can cluster and to which they can become attached. Vibrant objects resonate with larger issues which have no material form of their own" (34). For Shakespeare, the knotted rope may have been such a versatile prop through which a number of theatrical meanings could be negotiated, among them the metadramaturgic and metatheatrical exploration of the playwright-director's art of entanglement and resolution that was discussed in poetologies and plays of his time.

In Renaissance England, tying, slinging, and knotting were foundational and resonant metaphors of playwriting adopted from the drama theory of Graeco-

Roman Antiquity. Aristotle's *Poetics* recommend that the tragedian tie, sling, and weave several threads of action together in a process of *desis* ('binding together') to create a thick structure that Aristotle describes as *ploke*, a knot. For Aristotle, an effective tragedy thus creates a complex dramatic texture in which characters and audiences, at least temporarily, can no longer discern the course of the threads and hence cannot foretell the possible unravelling (*lysis*) of the knotted action (Vogel 270). In England, Aristotle's *Poetics* was increasingly discussed during the latter half of the sixteenth century in a cross-pollination between scholarly and literary works (Lazarus). The dramaturgy of comedy, too, has been theorised as a process of entanglement. Here, Renaissance humanist scholars followed the lead of an analysis of Terence's Roman New Comedy that was ascribed to the fourth-century grammarian Aelius Donatus. Most scholars today agree, however, that "On Drama" was in fact written by Donatus' contemporary Euanthius (Galbraith 8). Daniel C. Boughner traces the adaptation of Donatus' writing in Renaissance drama theory, above all in Scaliger's *Poetices* (1561), and sketches one possible line of transmission of Terence to *The Tempest* via Machiavelli and Jonson: "Terence invented this; Machiavelli revived it; and Jonson imported it to England. […] Jonson not only organised the action of his plays in the four parts outlined by him, but also adopted his nomenclature to describe his practice. Before him as he contemplated the disposition of the materials of *The Tempest*, therefore, Shakespeare found an unembarrassing richness of theory and application" (6).

Donatus' comment, which was regularly printed with Terence's plays in the Renaissance and taught in English grammar schools,[10] divides comedy into prologue, *protasis*, *epitasis*, and catastrophe. It describes the third part, the *epitasis*, as "the increase and progression of the agitation, and, as one might say, of the whole knot of errors" (Altman 133),[11] or, in the Latin original, the *nodus erroris*, which has sometimes been translated as "the knot of the whole uncertainty" (Herrick 119). An alternative version of the same passage describes the epitasis as "the complication of the plot, exquisitely fitted together" (*involutio argumenti, cuius elegantia conecticur*) (Altman 133). The similarity to Aristotle's theory is due to Donatus' theoretical synthesis, which aligned New Comedy plots with Aristotle's model of tragedy (Salingar 84). Influential Renaissance elaborations on *The Poetics* continued this trend.[12] Among them, Francesco Robortello's *De Arte Poetica Explicationes* (1548) and its companion essay "On Comedy" employed the Aristotelian notions of tying and

[10]Nevo 2. See also Galbraith, 10 11 for Terence in the school curriculum.

[11]He quotes and translates the Latin from: *Aeli Donati quod fertur commentum Terenti accedunt Eugraphi commen tum et scholia Bembina*, ed. Weßner.

[12]Galbraith provides a detailed reconstruction of the development of Renaissance drama theory. He shows how "Robortello's analysis is poised between the old and the new: the Aristotelian emphasis on the primacy of plots coexists with an account of comic character that incorporates many ideas from the earlier tradition of Terentian commentary" (12 13). See also Herrick 119.

untying to describe the dramaturgy of the comic plot (84-85). The various Renaissance reformulations of Aristotle's theory in light of New Comedy established a set of terms, including the 'whole knot of errors' or 'knot of the whole uncertainty' that became commonly used in Renaissance Europe (Galbraith 9).[13]

Shakespeare was aware of this dramaturgic discourse and alluded to it in his two previous shipwreck comedies. *Twelfth Night* takes up the notion of the knot of errors when Viola states, "O time, thou must untangle this, not I. / It is too hard a knot for me t'untie" (2.2.40-41). *The Comedy of* Errors reflects on playwriting in metatheatrical metaphors of tying. As Kent Cartwright has argued, the chain here is not only a decisive stage prop, but a concept that comments on the play's construction of the 'knot of errors' (12-13, 35): "In *Errors*, Shakespeare virtually allegorises that theory by writing a cleverly paradigmatic comedy driven by self-compounding errors that are materialised in the knotted ropes […]. *Errors*'s metadramatic self-awareness makes the play a celebration of comic form itself" (63). The early *Comedy of Errors* and the late *Tempest* have often been read as companion pieces because of their unusual observation of the classical unities and because of thematic continuities,[14] and I propose that they can also productively be read alongside each other with regard to their meta-generic self-awareness of the processes of binding. Shakespeare might have adopted the terminology from contemporary poetologies and he could have been inspired by his fellow playwrights. For instance, Battista Guarini's poetology on tragicomedy, *Il Compendio Della Poesia Tragicomica* (1601), reflected on Guarini's own playwriting practices, pointing out that "to know how to tie the knot is difficult enough, but how to loose it much more. So much does the untangling call, in the change of fortune, for the wonderful to be joined with verisimilitude" (202; translation by Doran 324). As Madeleine Doran has shown, Guarini and others acknowledged that "in general the knots of tragedy are more open, less artificially contrived than in comedy. For that very reason, he likes tragi-comedy, which has something of the seriousness of tragedy, yet which is managed with all the dexterity of comedy" (324). As Tanya Pollard points out, the playwrights of Shakespeare's generation were strongly influenced by Italian tragicomedy including Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido*, which was first translated into English in 1602, and Shakespeare's tragicomedies written around 1610, including *The Tempest,* drew on John Fletcher's pastoral tragicomedy *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1608), which was modelled on Guarini's *Il Pastor Fido* (426-27).[15]

[13]As Galbraith has argued, the "syncretic conflation" as well as the "theoretical diversity and even eclecticism" that characterised Renaissance comedy theory is analogous to the diversity and eclecticism of comic form in Shakespeare's plays (12).

[14]See in particular David Schalkwyk's chapter on *Errors* and *Tempest* in his study, which argues that "[t]he tension between these two plays reveals further the dark intricacies, but also the affective intimacies, that bind servant and master" (99).

[15]Tanya Pollard argues that even though "English writers were less self consciously classicizing than their continental counterparts, genre theory by writers such as George Puttenham, Philip Sidney, Ben Jonson, and John Fletcher drew explicitly on both classical texts and their contemporary continental critics. Tragicomedy's

Dramaturgic knitting is directly evoked in several plays by Ben Jonson, with whom Shakespeare's company collaborated several times, in whose plays Shakespeare acted at least twice, and whose writing became increasingly influential for Shakespeare at the time of writing *The Tempest*, when his company began to act in the Blackfriars for winter seasons (Holdsworth 78-79).[16] As Ian Donaldson has observed, "[k]notting and plotting often come together in Ben Jonson's imagination" (130). For example, in *Volpone*, first performed in 1606, the skill of lawyers to "make knots, and undoe them" ("Volpone" 1.3.57) is noted as a model for intrigue, and "many of the complications of the play's subsequent action are due indeed to the skilful ravellings and unravellings of Volpone, Mosca and Voltore" (Donaldson 130), with the denouement being celebrated by the first Avocatore's declaration, "The knot is now undone, by miracle!" (5.7.95). Jonson's late play *The Magnetic Lady*, written about twenty years after *The Tempest* in 1632, makes Jonson's interest in knotting and plotting particularly clear (Donaldson 119). In the introductory part, the boy explains, "A good play is like a skein of silk: which, if you take by the right end, you may wind off, at pleasure […]: but if you light on the wrong end, you will pull all into a knot, or elf-lock; which nothing but the shears or a candle will undo or separate" (Jonson, "Magnetic Lady" 483, lines 117-21). Before the denouement, the disconcerted critic Damplay considers the action of the play "pull'd into that knot, by your Poët, which I cannot easily, with all the strength of my imagination, untie" (555, Chorus IX. 2-3).[17]

Prospero's Entanglement: Childbirth, Lovers' Knots, and the Knot Garden

The notions of dramaturgic knitting and knotting that were discussed in Shakespeare's time help to understand how Prospero's magically devised play in its romance mode creates an exquisitely tied knot. The characteristic dramaturgic 'uncertainty' of this knot is heightened by the blending of tragic and comic features,[18] as *The Tempest* plays, until its turning point, with audiences'

popularity in England's commercial playhouses offers a striking example of the unexpected ways that the clas sical dramatic tradition offered both rhetoric and templates for the complex hybrid forms that are often seen as challenging its mandates" (424).

[16]Shakespeare might have adopted the names 'Prospero' and 'Stephano' from the first version of Jonson's *Every Man in His Humour*, in which Shakespeare acted in 1598 (Lucking 299; Holdsworth 81).

[17]See Boughner 9. In other plays, Jonson used the terminology of comedy theory, such as in *Every Man Out of His Humour*, which describes "epitasis" as the "busy part of our subject" (3.8.89). See Dutton 113. *The New Inn* in its initial "Argument" calls catastrophe the "knitting up of all" (370); see Dutton 114.

[18]See Mowat for the seminal discussion of the generic position of Shakespeare's dramatic romances as "carefully poised beyond tragedy or comedy, though linked to both forms" (29). Nevo proposes that Shakespeare's "post tragic time dominated tragi comic comedies" (6) are structured according to "what the neoclassical theorists of the Renaissance, following Donatus, called the *incrementum processusque turbarum*, the increase and pro gression of perturbations, or the 'forward progress of the turmoils', that is to say, confusion worse confounded or the knot of errors" (9). Miola also makes a case for the influence of New Comedy on Shakespeare's romances (140 69).

expectations regarding the generic form that the resolution of the dramatic knot will take. It adds to the complexity of the knot metaphor that the play associates magic binding with three metaphorical fields that recur throughout the play: magic (un)tying as a capacity that equals (and surpasses) giving birth, magic (un)tying that achieves the 'eternal' knot of marriage, and magic (un)tying as guiding the enchanted characters through a labyrinth, whose meandering, intersecting paths, as made literal by the notion of Ariadne's thread, create another knotted pattern.

The exposition of *The Tempest* introduces the metaphoric notion of magic (un)tying as bearing and delivering a child when Prospero forces his assistant Ariel into further service by reminding him how he once untied the airy spirit from Sycorax's spell that had confined Ariel in a split pine for twelve years: "a torment / To lay upon the damned, which Sycorax / Could not again undo. It was mine art, / When I arrived and heard thee, that made gape / The pine, and let thee out" (1.2.290-94). Fearing that Ariel neglects his indebtedness to his liberator, Prospero threatens to repeat and even outdo Sycorax's magic, to "rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails till / Thou hast howl'd away twelve winters" (1.2.295-97). The reminiscence introduces a conceptual overlaying of magic spells, (un)tying, and giving birth that will pervade the play: Before the magician threatens to "peg", that is, to chain his servant into "knotty entrails", to tie him into his past entanglement again, he reminds him how he had once delivered him from such confinement in a pseudo-birth scenario that made the mother's "rift" (1.2.278) "gape" (1.2.293) to let the child out (Adelman 237; Sundelson 39). Childbirth has traditionally been imagined as an act of untying, as reflected in the English term "deliver", derived from "late popular Latin *dēlīberāre*, used in sense of Latin *līberārе* to set free, liberate" (*OED Online*, s.v. "deliver, v.1"). That the mother binds her child (or vice versa, that the mother is bound by the child), who has to be untied in the act of birth, is part of the symbolic heritage of knots (Biedermann 198). *The Tempest* offers a hyperbolic and denigrated personification of the binding mother in Sycorax, the off-stage mother figure with whose magic power Prospero competes: She has tied Ariel into captivity in the 'knotty entrails' of the pine tree that symbolise, as David Sundelson has proposed, "permanent imprisonment in a constricting womb", from which Prospero eventually untied Ariel in a (re)birth scenario (39). The play takes the idea further by making the witch-mother's body a physical manifestation of her desire and capacity to fasten. As Prospero reminds Ariel, "hast thou forgot / The foul witch Sycorax, who with age and envy / Was grown into a hoop?" (1.2.258-60). As the *OED* explains, a hoop is a "circular band or ring of metal, wood, or other stiff material […] for binding together the staves of casks, tubs, etc" (s.v. "hoop, n.1"). Sycorax, grown into a hoop, physically embodies her capacity to bind her subjects and her inability or unwillingness

to disengage them again.[19] Prospero's claim that Sycorax herself was transformed into a hoop (the passive construction 'was grown' rather than 'has grown' is decisive here) also has the connotation of a punishment matching the crime: she was made to suffer from the very condition she had enforced on others.

At the outset of the play, Prospero thus declares his superior magic skills, as he is not only capable of both (maternal) tying and (paternal) untying, but also constructs and resolves more captivating magical knots. The latest RSC production of *The Tempest*, directed by Gregory Doran in 2016 and shown in cinemas worldwide since 2017, visualised this knotting and delivery as a second birth in a spectacular digitally enhanced stage image. The production projected avatars of Ariel in many scenes, including scene 1.2, where Prospero's reminiscence was depicted visually. Aebischer's analysis of the scene gives a vivid account of the theatrical experience:

> While a large cylindrical mesh screen was lowered to surround [Mark] Quartley [the actor playing Ariel], a terrifying projection of roots and bark rapidly erupted from the ground to encase both his physical and virtual bodies. The projection effectively layered a magnified view of the avatar Ariel's tortured captivity over the human Ariel's body, which contorted in pain […]. As Quartley writhed in the centre of the mesh, his gestures animated the anguish of his avatar into a larger than life expression of affect […]. Meanwhile, a 'sound scape of tightening knots and creaking timber' translated 'the torment of the imprisonment, and the breath seizing agony' into aural affective triggers (134 5).

As Prospero recounted his liberation of Ariel, the cylindrical mesh was raised and the projections of wooden knots dissolved. The actor playing Ariel, who wore a tight nude suit, pretended to be pushed out of the channel as if during birth, for a moment lying on the ground as a helpless, naked creature before he addressed the father who had delivered him.

It is part of the sophistication of Prospero's knotwork that he employs not only physical tethering, but also emotional binding. Thus, after threatening to bind Ariel again, Prospero's magic uses a combination of physical and psychological tying to control the shipwrecked characters, chiefly by exploiting the bereavement induced by the initial tempest spectacle. The King of Naples and the accompanying members of his court mourn for the king's lost son, and Prince Ferdinand in turn grieves for his father. The first acts have a particular focus on Ferdinand as the object of Prospero's multiple magic tyings. Even before audiences encounter Ferdinand, Ariel describes (and physically expresses) his state as 'knotted' by grief:

[19]Sycorax as a hoop is a complex metaphor that itself binds together several of the play's concerns. For instance, Zabus reads it as a symbol of Sycorax's bent, deviant rule (170 71), and Garber suggests that Sycorax grown into a hoop is "a walking sign of cyclical repetition, endlessly returning upon herself", just like the action of *The Tempest* (862). Pye suggests that the hoop stands for "the woman as sheer negation" as well as for "Prospero's own dream of self completion" (337).

> The King's son have I landed by himself,
> Whom I left cooling of the air with sighs,
> In an odd angle of the isle, and sitting,
> His arms in this sad knot. (1.2.222 25)

Ferdinand's physical position with arms folded invokes a "conventional sign of melancholy", as David Lindley notes ("Tempest" 110n224). Shakespeare had used this stage image earlier, when in *Titus Andronicus*, Titus asks his brother to "unknit that sorrow-wreathen knot. / Thy niece and I, poor creatures, want our hands / And cannot passionate our tenfold grief / With folded arms" (3.2.4-7). In the less drastic moment in *The Tempest*, it indicates the psychological binding into a "sad knot" through mourning, whose tightness is increased when Ariel's "Full fathom five thy father lies" (1.2.397-405) song reinforces Ferdinand's fear that his father has perished. This initial position of mourning as visualised in the simple knot of folded arms starts a process of tying that will create an intricate state of entanglement with uncertain resolution.

For the next step of Ferdinand's emotional tying, Prospero orchestrates the meeting between Miranda and Ferdinand, adding a romantic liaison to the binding by mourning. In this case, *The Tempest* does not directly use the rhetoric of binding. However, for Shakespeare's audiences the scene might have evoked the emotional attachment of lovers to each other that was frequently envisioned as an ornamental knot in the early modern imaginary (and materially created in decorative knots of girdles, stitched on clothes, carved in stone, woven into carpets or built in gardens[20]): the 'true lover's knot'. As William Carroll has pointed out, the specific form of this knot, the "iconographic image of the elaborately encoiled and overlapping thread, with no beginning or end, which unites true lovers", reflected the insolubility of the lovers' union (115). Shakespeare directly refers to the concept in several plays, for instance in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, where Julia plans to disguise herself as a page and "knit […] up" her hair "in silken strings / With twenty odd-conceited true-love knots" (2.7.45-46) and in *Two Noble Kinsmen*, where it is employed to celebrate the friendship of Theseus and Pirithous: "Their knot of love, / Tied, weaved, entangled, with so true, so long, / And with a finger of so deep a cunning, / May be outworn, never undone" (1.3.41-44). In view of this early modern trope, one might argue that the romance plot that is orchestrated (or at least catalysed and overseen) by Prospero is brought forward by having Ferdinand and Miranda bind each other in a lovers' knot, thus achieving the dynastic binding of Naples and Milan. Spellbound by instant love when they first see each other, they are immediately "in either's powers" ("The Tempest" 1.2.453), and during their next encounter, when they already join hands in a

[20]See Whalley and Jennings's richly illustrated study for examples from the Tudor and Stuart periods. Whalley and Jennings 27 57.

marriage vow in a handfasting ritual that would have been considered an emotionally, socially, and legally "binding engagement" in early modern England (Adair 144),[21] Ferdinand comments to Miranda, "The very instant that I saw you did / My heart fly to your service, there resides / To make me slave to it" (3.1.64-66). As Sokol and Sokol explain in their study *Shakespeare, Law and Marriage* "[h]andfasting meant the joining of hands accompanied by mutual agreement to be married" (18), and they see the ritual between Miranda and Ferdinand as a clear example of this practice (20). The play's action and rhetoric of love as a process of willing tying here brings together the traditional notions of marriage as eternal binding (as enacted in the holding or interlacing of hands) and romance as servitude. David Schalkwyk has shown how the "well-known paraphernalia of service and slavery" are invoked to set up a paradoxical notion of love as perfect freedom through willing service, as an experience of liberation through a radical acceptance of the bondage induced by love (98). In this respect, Ferdinand's marriage vow in the third act that he gives his hand "with a heart as willing / As bondage e'er of freedom" (3.1.89-90) is particularly relevant, because it paradoxically invokes the desire to be freed from bondage as reinforcement of his enthusiastic submission to love.[22]

For early modern audiences, the appearance of Juno in the betrothal masque of the fourth act, which "is re-enacting central concerns of the play as a whole" (Orgel, "Introduction" 49), could have reinforced the association of Miranda and Ferdinand's romance with the lovers' knot (soon to be turned into the marriage knot), as the goddess of marriage was frequently pictured with fetters at her feet, and might have carried this prop in the original productions of *The Tempest*. As Vincenzo Cartari points out in his commentary on ancient myths, translated into English in 1599, "by these was meant the marriage knot and linke which coupleth the man and wife together" (Cartari; see Vaughan and Vaughan 72). The betrothal masque in *The Tempest* was probably inspired by Jonson's elaborate court masques, among them *Hymenaei*, performed at court in 1606 for the wedding of the Earl of Essex and Lady Frances Howard.[23] Here Hymen, the god of marriage, wears "a zone, or girdle about her waist, of white wool, fastened with the Herculean knot" (77, ll.50-51) and the allegorical figure of Reason explains: "The zone of wool about her waist, / Which, in contrary circles cast, / Doth meet in one strong

[21] See also Ingram 189 90, 196 for the discussion of contemporary marriage practices including handfasting and Giese 128 29. See also James Black's earlier discussion, which sees the vow as a limit case between a *verba de praesenti* and a *verba de futuro* contract, that is, a promise of future marriage (32 33). Both Giese and Richardson discuss a sixteenth century gimmal ring in the Museum of London's collection that may have served as a betrothal ring: It is made of two hoops which are held together by two interlocking golden hands. Its inscription "As handes doe shvt so hart be knit" emphasises the romantic metaphor of clasped hands and intertwined hearts (Giese 137 and Richardson 1).

[22] As Schalkwyk comments, "With this vow in the name of freedom, Ferdinand binds himself forever, transforming constraining bondage into sustaining bond" (107). See also Evett 183 211.

[23] See Shaw for one of the most influential early comparisons and Gurr for a more recent survey discussion of parallels between *Hymenaei* and *The Tempest*. Shaw 29 39; Gurr, "New Directions" 109 13.

knot that binds, / Tells you, so should all married minds" (82, ll. 173-76).[24] As Jonson explains in his commentary on *Hymenaei*, Roman marriage rites "join [ed] the married pair with bands of silk" (514n35-57); a ritual with comparable symbolic and legal value as the early modern English practice of handfasting that constituted the binding engagement of lovers. In contrast to the educated audiences of *The Tempest*'s documented 1611 and 1613 performances at court, not all audience members of the play's first productions at the Globe and the Blackfriars would have studied handbooks like Cartari's or have seen or read Jonson's *Hymenaei*. Nonetheless, many of them probably were able to decode the symbolic and mythical significance of allegorical figures because they commonly appeared in courtly and popular pageantry (Lindley, "Introduction" 13). Lindley considers the allegorical meaning of Shakespeare's betrothal masque in *The Tempest* to be fairly straightforward and requiring "comparatively little exegesis" (13), so a considerable number of early modern theatre-goers and readers would have associated the romance and betrothal of Miranda and Ferdinand with the knot imagery of love and marriage.

From the simple hoop to folded arms, expressing Ferdinand's mourning, to the mutual binding through love, traditionally envisioned as the true lover's knot or the marriage knot, the knot structures of Prospero's plot become increasingly complex and grow even denser through their interconnections. As part of Prospero's magic potentiation of Ferdinand and Miranda's romance in the first act, Prospero binds Ferdinand further, this time physically. Accordingly, the initial metaphor of physical chaining, of 'being grown into a hoop,' returns subliminally in this binding scenario. Staging a contrived usurpation plot that fuels the passion of the lovers, Prospero threatens to shackle Ferdinand with the words, "I'll manacle thy neck and feet together" (1.2.464), effectively turning him into another hoop, whose head and feet meet (Sundelson 46). When the prince attempts to free himself from his bondage with his sword, Prospero casts a final neurological and mental spell on Ferdinand, one that makes him first freeze in movement and then calmly accept rather than violently react to his physical and emotional binding. Through Prospero's magic, Ferdinand's "nerves are in their infancy again / And have no vigour in them" (1.2.487-88), his "spirits", as he acknowledges himself,

> as in a dream, are all *bound up*.
> My father's loss, the weakness which I feel,
> The wreck of all my friends, nor this man's threats,
> To whom I am subdued, are but light to me,
> Might I but through my prison once a day
> Behold this maid (1.2.489 94).[25]

[24]See Carroll 116 117 for additional mythological sources of the virgin knot.
[25]Emphasis is my own.

By inducing this trance which further exploits Ferdinand's willing binding by love, the magician demonstrates the height of his powers, a last tying that fixes the prior emotional and physical slingings, effectively creating a knot of submission that Ferdinand no longer seeks to cut. Therefore, by the end of the first act, Prospero as playwright-magician has created a densely ensnared state for Ferdinand, who knots together various threads of the action: he is knotted by bereavement in the shipwreck plot pattern, lovingly attached to Miranda in the romance plot, shackled as Prospero's slave in the contrived usurpation plot, and his spirit is tied up in a magical trance that makes him accept rather than rebel against this entanglement.

This dramaturgic knotwork of Ferdinand's multiple bindings is further interlaced with the simultaneous quest plot, in which the King of Naples and his court party search for the prince and become increasingly convinced that he has drowned. Ariel makes the king believe that his son died in return for Prospero's and Miranda's deaths and demands that the usurpers concede their guilt and "hang and drown / Their proper selves" (3.3.59-60). In Ariel's curious phrasing, which refers back to Gonzalo's comment on the rope of destiny in the opening storm scene, hanging sounds like the prerequisite for drowning; and indeed, in my reading, Alonso's projected self-murder results from Prospero's art of entanglement. After he 'knotted' Ferdinand in his bereavement, he now 'knits up' King Alonso in suicidal grief, and the other members of the court party in their respective states of remorse, bewilderment, or unscrupulous political ambition. As Prospero declares, his "high charms" have managed to "knit up" his enemies "[i]n their distractions. They now are in my power" (3.3.88-90). By the end of the third act, Prospero has thus created a dense magical knotwork into which he has tied the characters' paths.

The resolution of this knot is, as yet, uncertain, possibly even to Prospero himself. The final lines of the fourth act, in an echo of the ending of the third act, sum up the achieved tying. Prospero again asserts that he has now attained full power over his enemies, but he does not reveal his further plans. Once more highlighting his observance of a constricted time structure ("At this hour", "shortly"), he demands of Ariel one last service before he sets him free:

> Let them be hunted soundly. At this hour
> Lies at my mercy all mine enemies.
> Shortly shall all my labours end, and thou
> Shalt have the air at freedom. For a little,
> Follow and do me service (4.1.260 64).

Raising suspense, as typical of the 'cliffhanger' endings of each act in plays performed in the Blackfriars theatre (Gurr, "*Tempest*'s Tempest" 39),[26] the

[26]In the indoor theatre, the break between each act was marked by a pause of a few minutes needed to trim the candles. See Lindley 5 for a brief discussion of the powerful dramatic moments at the end of each act.

phrases closing the third and fourth act purposely leave open how Prospero will untie his dramaturgic knot in the finale (cf. Boughner 9):[27] Will the aftermath of a brother's usurpation end in a tragic finale as in earlier revenge tragedies or in the benevolent untying as typical of the endings of comedy and romance?[28] Will Prospero untie the knot skilfully? Will he cut it violently? Will he fail and leave the characters in their bound state like Sycorax did before him? For first-time readers and audiences then and today, all these options are possible. The closing of act four also, once again, presents this dramaturgic untying as a metaphorical birth: once Prospero's "labours" have ended, Ariel will experience the "air at freedom", he will be delivered by the playwright-magus whose powers encompass maternal binding and paternal unbinding.

In contrast to the magician and his assistant, the tied-up characters are unaware of Prospero's dramaturgic control and perceive their entanglement in the well-timed plot lines as threatening and perplexing. Accordingly, they describe their confused quests as meandering through a labyrinth: they are recurrently 'amazed'. For instance, Gonzalo laments in exhaustion, "By'r lakin, I can go no further, sir; / My old bones aches. Here's a maze trod, indeed, / Through fortrights and meanders!" (3.3.1-3).[29] The early modern labyrinth or maze was frequently built and metaphorically envisioned as a 'knot garden' (Thomas and Faircloth 195). Gardening books like Thomas Hill's highly successful *The Gardeners Labyrinth*, first published in 1577 and reprinted several times until 1660, attest to the popularity of labyrinthine knot gardens in the Tudor and Stuart periods (Whalley and Jennings 43). As Robin Whalley and Anne Jennings have shown in their richly illustrated study of knot gardens, Hill's earlier publication *A Most Briefe and Pleasaunt Treatyse, Teachynge How to Dresse, Sowe, and Set a Garden* (published about 1558) contains "the first printed English knot forming the focus of a garden layout" in two designs for imaginary maze gardens (Whalley and Jennings 44). The illustrations returned in his subsequent publications, where "Hill sees the knot and the maze as almost interchangeable" (45). This remarkably close metaphoric link between entangled threads and the labyrinth derives from the most famous mythological labyrinth: The Cretan maze containing the Minotaur, through which Ariadne's thread guided Theseus, who, in the process of walking towards the centre, creates an interwoven pattern that is

[27] As de Grazia puts it, "[o]nce Prospero's anger is noted, the question of what he intends to do to his enemies before he decides to forgive them becomes more acute" (256).

[28] Cf. also Trüstedt's discussion of *The Tempest* as a comedy of tragedy. She argues, too, that the final act turns tragedy into comedy without completely dissolving its tragic potential (197).

[29] As Thomas M. Greene has argued, Gonzalo's notion of 'treading a maze' might refer to "[t]he activity of treading a maze in dance, in ritual, in equestrian spectacle, or in folk sports [that] has been ubiquitous and long lived in the history of European cultures" including "turf mazes dug for rustic games […]. We know little about what the 'treading' actually involved in those quaint mazes, but we know slightly more about its choreographic counter part at the Jacobean court" (1403). Jonson's masques, among them *The Masque of Beauty* (1608), "exhibited mazelike movements" (1448), and Shakespeare might have been inspired by them. Like Whalley and Jennings, Greene notes the conceptual intersection of knots and mazes, as the dances were sometimes described as 'curious knots' in the masques (1453).

resolved by his way out of the maze (15).[30] As Whalley and Jennings point out, "[t]the knot and other Elizabethan devices are symbolic forms, a way of presenting Tudor conceits: the meaning has to be discovered or decoded, and the maze solved by arriving at the centre and being in possession of knowledge" (45).[31] In the early Stuart years, when Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest*, popular gardening books continued the close association of mazes and knots, for example in Gervase Markham's *The Countrie Housewifes Garden* (1617), which reprinted Hill's maze design (53). The notion of the knot-garden is used in several of Shakespeare's plays, for instance in *Love's Labour's Lost*, where the king mentions a "curious-knotted garden" (1.1.241).[32] Since the concepts and practices of knotting/being entangled and constructing/walking through a labyrinth were so closely linked in early modern England, I suggest that *The Tempest* uses the maze as a third metaphoric field to elaborate the idea of magic as knotwork.

This metaphorical association of magic tyings with the knot garden reinforces the metadramaturgic relevance of Prospero's slinging and tying. As Juliane Vogel has argued, dramaturgic *desis* in general is conceptually linked to the labyrinth, because the interwoven plot lines create a spatial intensity that defies insight and prediction of further developments (270-71). Just like every labyrinth "presume[s] a double perspective: maze-treaders, whose vision ahead and behind is severely constricted and fragmented, suffer confusion, whereas maze-viewers who see the pattern whole, from above or in a diagram, are dazzled by its complex artistry" (Reed Doob 1),[33] every texture created by dramaturgic knitting allows for two perspectives, too: (1) a dense surface structure where the course of the threads (the actions) cannot be discerned and which hence results not only in complexity, but also in complication and (2) the deeper knowledge of an underlying pattern, which entails the knowledge of how to untangle the complications created by the dramaturgic concatenation (Vogel 270-71). The *desis* of tragedy as described by Aristotle thus results in an unsettling loss of orientation for the characters and frequently for audiences, too, who nonetheless sense an opaque order, an as-yet undeciphered pattern (270-71). The 'knot of errors' of comedy likewise can be

[30]This link between threadwork and labyrinthine knot gardens is further strengthened by the fact that designs for English knot gardens were probably taken from embroidered textiles in Hill's publications (Whalley and Jennings 45; 48); as the very title of Hill's *A Most Briefe and Pleasaunt Treatyse, Teachynge How to Dresse, Sowe, and Set a Garden* signals, knot designs and knot symbolism connected a number of artistic practices that dealt with different materials. Accordingly, Whalley and Jennings explain how "the ribbons of vegetation *weave together*" in Hill's increasingly complex designs (48, emphasis mine).

[31]In late Tudor England "descriptions of mazes almost invariably refer to the low growing shrub maze as opposed to the hedge which typically appeared in the seventeenth century, the distinction first being made by Lawson in 1618 when he referred to 'Mazes well framed a mans height'" (Whalley and Jennings 45). It is difficult to say which maze Shakespeare might have had in mind, but since the loss of orientation and the search for a truth at the centre applies to both forms, the difference might not be of direct relevance.

[32]See Greene 1453 for the conceptual intersection of mazes and knots in Jonson's work, also derived from garden labyrinths.

[33]See also Nicora 279 and Farabee 131.

compared to a labyrinth, as one of the meanings of "error", derived from Latin *errāre*, to wander, is "[t]he action of roaming or wandering; hence a devious or winding course" (*OED Online*, s.v. "error, n."; Cartwright 10). Just like the confused court party in *The Tempest*, the characters in Jonson's comedy *Volpone*, first performed a few years before *The Tempest*, comment on the surprising twists of the action by comparing them to a labyrinth: "This same's a labyrinth!" (5.10.42); "What maze is this" (5.7.43). As Donaldson has pointed out, "[l]abyrinths are traditionally associated with another and different figure which Jonson often uses to describe his plots: the manipulation of a thread" (129). In this tradition, a few decades after the original performances of *Volpone* and *The Tempest* and shortly before the premiere of John Dryden and William Davenant's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Tempest* entitled *The Tempest, or The Enchanted Island* (1667), Dryden discussed the work of his predecessors in his *Poesy* (1666) and explicitly described playwriting as the construction of a dramaturgic labyrinth: "you will find it infinitely pleasing to be led in a labyrinth of design, where you see some of your way before you, yet discern not the end till you arrive at it" (Dryden 6; see Donaldson 125). I propose that Shakespeare links the knot garden to the question of dramaturgic *desis* and *lysis* – knotting and unravelling – by participating in the early modern association of labyrinths and entangled threads. As typical of labyrinthine art of dramaturgic (dis)entanglement, *The Tempest* strikes a balance between giving audiences more information than the characters have and keeping them uninformed enough to raise suspense. For example, while the characters experience their wandering as confused meandering, audiences know that they are in fact led by Prospero and Ariel with meticulous timing on well-planned paths to the island's centre, Prospero's cave, but the audience does not know what will happen once all characters are assembled (Nicora 276).

The Denouement: Untying the Knots

In *The Tempest*, the process of untying is not only presented as the undoing of magic spells – that is, the unbinding of physical shackles and the dissolution of mental and emotional knots –, but also negotiated in the associated metaphoric field of reaching the revelatory centre of the maze. From there, Ariadne's thread guides Theseus to the exit, undoing the entanglement that was created when he erred through the meanders in search of the centre. This way back out of the maze eventually brings the characters, audiences, and the play itself to its resolution, which Robortello aptly described in his influential Renaissance comment on Aristotle's *Poetics* as the "outcome (*exitus*) of the matter" (Herrick 123). For Ferdinand, the process of untying begins in the fourth act, before the assembly of all characters at the maze's centre, because the partial resolution of Ferdinand's bindings is essential to achieve the denouement that Prospero has in mind. Prospero first unties the bond that makes Ferdinand

the magician's slave and gives Miranda as a "gift" (4.1.13) to him as "compensation" (4.1.2) for this "too austere" (4.1.1) ligature. However, Prospero is concerned that this act of unbinding might proceed too rashly. He warns Ferdinand,

> If thou dost break her virgin knot before
> All sanctimonious ceremonies may
> With full and holy rite be ministered,
> No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall
> To make this contract grow (4.1.15 19)

The expression "virgin-knot" for 'maidenhead' is unusual and has been explained by editors as a reference to Catullus's expression *zonam solvere virgineam*, which means untying the virgin's girdle (Orgel, "Tempest" 171n15; Vaughan and Vaughan 265n15). As Lindley explains, "in Roman marriage rites the virgin bride wore a knotted girdle" that the bridegroom had to untie ("Tempest" 180n15). Like the appearance of Juno discussed above, Shakespeare might have taken over this notion from Jonson's masque *Hymenaei*. In his extensive commentary, Jonson elaborated that the knot on Juno's girdle invokes the "*Nodus Herculeanus*, which the husband at night untied in sign of good fortune, that he might be happie in propagation of issue, as Hercules was, who left seventy children" ("Complete Masques" 517n175). Therefore, even though the marriage knot is indissoluble, knotting is followed by a process of untying in the early modern knot imagery of romance and marriage, and the right order is essential: the virgin knot must only be untied after the marriage knot has officially and properly been fastened. The fact that Prospero imagines Ferdinand breaking rather than untying this knot signals his fear of a too-rash disentangling of this particular situation.

Through the father's concern with his daughter's virginity, this moment also prepares the onstage playwright's awareness of the challenges inherent in any act of dramaturgic *lysis*, which is his task of the final act once all characters are assembled at the centre of his dramaturgic labyrinth, in the moment of utmost entanglement. As Vogel points out, for Aristotle the desire for resolution is to be treated carefully, in particular in tragedies, because the disentanglement might unleash the violence accumulated in the knotted action (273). In *The Tempest*, I suggest, the virgin knot metaphorically ties together the generically shaped plot options – the romance and marriage typical of comedy and the violation and destruction typical of tragedy – because Prospero's warning reactivates the painful memory of Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda, the earlier untimely, violent attempt at breaking the virgin knot that her father almost could not avert. The shadow of this rape haunts the romance between Ferdinand and Miranda, because Ferdinand's rhetoric of romance is afflicted by fantasies of violation (Sundelson 48; Orgel, "Prospero's Wife" 5; Kunat 310). Thus, the first step of Ferdinand's unbinding prepares the ground for the general resolution, as it highlights both the potential pleasures and the

potential perils involved in *lysis* and raises the question of whether the solution will be a careful process of untying or an impatient act of breaking.

In the final act, all characters arrive at Prospero's cave, the labyrinth's centre, where the playwright-magician carries out the denouement. The action starts with a metadramaturgic dialogue between Prospero and Ariel that accentuates the moment of maximal interweaving and complication, which Aristotle described as *ploke,* as a sophisticated knot. Accordingly, Ariel emphasises the physical tightness of the entanglement: as he reports to Prospero, the King of Naples and his party are now next to Prospero's cell "[c]onfined together" (5.1.7), "all prisoners" (5.1.9), who "cannot budge till your release" (5.1.11). Subsequently, the on-stage arrival of the court party is celebrated as a ritualistic gathering by Prospero. He traces a circle on the ground into which they step "and there stand charmed" (5.1.57). To assemble the characters in this small circle visualises the tightness of tragic *ploke* or the comic *nodus erroris*. It might also refer back to the magic hoop of Sycorax, emphasising Prospero's claim of superior skills of entanglement and solution. While Sycorax (according to Prospero) bound one character into a tree and subsequently failed or refused to untie him, Prospero has not only created more dynamic action than a twelve-year-long imprisonment, but has also managed to interlace his plot lines into a multidirectional, tight knot, which he now declares he will untie in an equally complex process. When all his enemies are at his mercy, Prospero is inspired by Ariel's compassion and therefore abstains from a tragic resolution guided by his desire for revenge. Famously, he states, "Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th' quick, / Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury / Do I take part. The rarer action is in virtue than in vengeance" (5.1.25-28). The play leaves open whether the playwright-magician here in fact changes his mind or whether this genre shift from revenge tragedy to comedy/romance was the goal of his knotting all along. Dramaturgically speaking, his declaration *is* the *peripeteia*, the unexpected reversal, because it presents the entangled situation in a new light and initiates the process of denouement (Vogel 273). Prospero aptly describes the resolution as the untying and resolving of the various knots into which he forced the islanders and the newcomers alike. He decides to "release" (5.1.30) and "resolve" (5.1.251) his enemies and demands of Ariel to "[s]et Caliban and his companions free; / *Untie* the spell" (5.1.254-55).

Prospero's resolution again envisions this multi-coded untying also as acts of delivery, because Prospero stages multiple (re)birth scenarios at the centre of the labyrinth. The characters experience both the miraculous return of the supposedly dead and a rebirth of their own identities. As Prospero claims in his Medea-inspired farewell speech at the opening of Act 5, his "potent art" has once again re-animated the dead (5.1.50).[34] Renouncing such necromantic

[34]For the impact Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on *The Tempest*, see Bate 240. For the necromancy speech modelled on Ovid's Medea, Bate argues: "Recognition of the source is absolutely crucial, for it puts the audience into the same position as Prospero: as he sees that his magic must be rejected because it may so readily be abused

"rough magic" (5.1.50), he instead stages as his denouement a series of alleged revivifications as theatrical make-believe, beginning with his own. When Prospero appears in the clothes in which he was banned and presents himself as if returned from the dead (Neill 101-2),[35] his brother, his former counsellor, and the King of Naples with his court party at first doubt whether he is indeed "a living prince" (5.1.110). While Alonso is in awe of the seemingly resurrected Prospero, Sebastian fears that he is a devilish revenant returned to take revenge. In other words, the suspense as to whether Prospero will stage a tragic denouement or whether he has a more reconciliatory ending in mind is upheld for the characters, while audiences can enjoy the dramatic irony of their superior knowledge. The effect is repeated when Prospero asserts to "bring forth a wonder" (5.1.172) and displays Miranda and Ferdinand who were both considered dead. The King of Naples first responds to his son's reappearance with fear and suspicion. Ferdinand himself at this moment acknowledges Prospero as his "second father" who has given him "a second life" (5.1.198). In addition to Ferdinand, more characters experience a rebirth of their own identities in the magic circle at the centre of the labyrinth, either because they restore their former sense of self after the perplexing and painful experiences on the island or because they gain a new or renewed social role: Antonio loses his political role as Duke of Milan whereas Prospero is re-empowered, Sebastian is exposed as a conspirator, Miranda and Ferdinand as a married couple will become the rulers of both Naples and Milan, and Ariel and Caliban are set free. Throughout cultural history, the arrival at a labyrinth's centre has been a profoundly transformative experience amounting to a sense of rebirth, as the explorer traditionally "has the opportunity to discover something so basic that it demands a fundamental change of direction" (Kern 30). As Hermann Kern further explains in his cultural history of labyrinths, "[t]herefore, turning around at the center does not just mean giving up one's previous existence; it also marks a new beginning. A walker leaving a labyrinth is not the same person who entered it, but has been born again into a new phase or level of existence; the center is where death and rebirth occur" (30; see also Nicora 283). Just like the way back out of the maze is predetermined because the walker, like Theseus, will retrace their steps, in the associated metaphor of dramaturgic entanglement, the knot created by the intersecting course of the thread has to be untied in the same way it was tied. The untying in rebirth at the centre of Prospero's "as strange a maze as e'er men trod" (5.1.245) thus initiates the denouement.

Prospero's resolution of his entanglement follows the dramaturgic principles described by Aristotle, as it skilfully unties the dramaturgic knot, even

when driven by vengeance rather than virtue, so at exactly the same moment we see that it must be rejected because it is, for all its apparent whiteness, the selfsame black magic as that of Medea" (252).

[35] More recent criticism has built on Frye's early observation that "[w]e can say here, as in *The Winter's Tale*, that people die and come to life again, but only metaphorically" (180). See also Beckwith 45 67.

observing Aristotle's demand of probability. As Guarini put it in his influential above-quoted manifesto on tragicomedy that drew on Aristotle, the "untangling" via peripeteia has to bring together "the wonderful" with "verisimilitude" (Guarini 202, trans. in Doran 324). In *The Tempest*, however, this process is not finalised on stage. Upholding the sense of wonder, Prospero postpones the complete denouement for the characters to the off-stage future. As he promises to Alonso, "[a]t pick'd leisure / Which shall be shortly", will he "resolve" him in a way that will appear "probable":

> Sir, my liege,
> Do not infest your mind with beating on
> The strangeness of this business. At pick'd leisure
> Which shall be shortly, single I'll resolve you,
> (Which to you shall seem probable) of every
> These happen'd accidents (5.1.248 53)

Even though Prospero here postpones the denouement for the on-stage addressee, audiences can already judge the probability of the *lysis* he promises to Alonso, and whether Alonso, as the chief representative of the amazed court party, will indeed be "resolve[d]" of "every / These happen'd accidents": whether he will be led out of the maze, whether his rebirth at the maze's centre will liberate him completely from Prospero's multifold bindings. Therefore, when Prospero explicitly says to Alonso, "I'll deliver all" (5.1.317), somewhat megalomaniacally announcing complete resolution, audiences might believe him.

And yet, the play invites audiences to doubt Prospero's assertion of skilful and complete denouement, as the ending's restorations and reconciliations are not indisputable. For example, Ferdinand and Miranda's future marriage is undercut by their quarrel over a chess game. Though Alonso has gone through extreme emotional states that have made him repent supporting Antonio's usurpation, Milan's subordination to Naples, which was part of Antonio's scheme, is not reversed. The political restoration is hence only partial. Accordingly, by calling Alonso "my liege" (5.1.248), Prospero acknowledges that he himself is still tied to Alonso by "the bond between superior and vassal" (*OED* Online, s.v. "liege, adj. and n."). The resolution is further questioned because Prospero has to use unexpected force in his confrontation with Antonio and Sebastian, which undermines the festive, reconciliatory spirit of the romance/comedy resolution. As neither Antonio nor Sebastian show any signs of remorse, they do not fulfil the condition which Prospero set for his reversal to forgiveness rather than revenge (5.1.28-30; Grams Hunter 240). In turn, Prospero's forgiving of their trespasses is qualified and appears to be mere lip service rather than a change of heart (Sundelson 50; H. Berger 276). Therefore, Prospero's denouement remains ambivalent: while on the one hand he skilfully unravels his plot and achieves many of the promised

outcomes, on the other hand the reconciliatory resolution that he claims to have accomplished is questionable. In the finale, the decisive difference between Prospero's declared resolution according to traditional dramaturgic principles and Shakespeare's own, unrulier ending becomes clear. Rather than aiming to achieve the ideal of complete *lysis* as the onstage dramatist does, to 'deliver all,' Shakespeare creates an open ending that maintains some of its complications and highlights its unfinished business.[36]

In her exploration of tragic *desis* and *lysis* since Greek antiquity, Vogel has argued that in contrast to Greek tragedy and the European neoclassical tragedies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Shakespeare's endings are interested in states of dynamic and intrinsic entanglement, which cannot fully be untied by the dramatist in an orderly manner, but can only be ended by death (287). In this respect, they anticipate modern, non-cathartic dramaturgies (288). In *The Tempest*'s romance ending, too, death is evoked as a full solution. Thus, Gonzalo greets the miraculously saved boatswain, "I prophesied, if a gallows were on land / This fellow could not drown" (5.1.220-21), thus envisioning, albeit humorously, his future death by hanging. Referring back to the 'rope of destiny' of the opening scene, the play here reintroduces a metaphor of fate that exceeds the control of the playwright-magician. Prospero himself disrupts the festive mood of the romance ending by suddenly anticipating his own passing as the projected finale in the off-stage future. After Miranda and Ferdinand's wedding in Naples, Prospero will "retire […] to Milan, where / Every third thought shall be my grave" (5.1.314-15). Yet, once again, this predicted death is the prerequisite for a new life, as it fits the tragicomic mode of the play in which "a character can both die and not die, and so inhabit tragic and comic worlds at the same time" (Womack, 302). In the epilogue, Prospero returns to the stage, and the play thereby continues its rebirths beyond the denouement of the main action in "the strange spectacle of a theatrical afterlife" (Greenblatt 260). The epilogue raises all the crucial questions of the play once more when 'Prospero' asks for the audience's "release" from the "bands" that tie the character to the island and the actor to the stage performance (Epilogue, l. 9): The theatre audience's awareness is divided between the magic of performance and the performance of magic, as Prospero is here both a ghost and alive, performer and character, waiting for the audience to free him while himself scripting us as rescuers. Instead of 'delivering all,' as the onstage dramatist promises, *The Tempest*'s sophisticated tragicomic art of entanglement eschews resolution even to the point of defying death.

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[36]As Orgel puts it in the introduction to his *Tempest* edition, "Neat as its conclusion is, […] *The Tempest* in its final moments opens outwards […]. [T]here will always be a great deal of unfinished business" ("Introduction" 55).

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