Oedipus and Oh Dae-su: Freedom and Necessity through Aristotle's Poetica
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1 Introduction

δεῖ γὰρ καὶ ἄνευ τοῦ ὁρᾶν οὕτω συνεστάναι τὸν μῦθον ὥστε τὸν [5] ἀκούοντα τὰ πράγματα γινόμενα καὶ φρίττειν καὶ ἐλεεῖν ἐκ τῶν συμβαινόντων· ἅπερ ἂν πάθοι τις ἀκούων τὸν τοῦ Οἰδίπου μῦθον (1453b3-7).

For it is necessary that, even without seeing it, the plot should be structured in such a way that the person who hears of the occurring events, experiences horror and pity at the things that happen; as one who hears the plot of *Oedipus* would.[2]

Sophocles´ *Oedipus Rex* has become one of the most famous tragedies of antiquity, praised not in the least place by Aristotle multiple times in his *Poetica*. Moreover it is a widely adapted piece, with theater plays, movies and books retelling the story coming out every year still. These adaptation can be faithful to the original play by Sophocles while others are less recognizable as the story of Oedipus. The story of the young king Oedipus, left to die after his birth in Thebes by his parents, Iocasta and Laius, but saved by a shepherd who brought him to the home of Merope and Polybus in Corinth, seems to speak to the imagination. Oedipus has become known as the man who married his mother and killed his father, because, unaware of his heritage, he left his foster parents to save them from this fate after an oracle told him this would happen. This is how he ends up in Thebes again, killing Laius as a passenger at a crossroads and marrying his now widowed mother. Sophocles' play recounts Oedipus' determined search of the truth after Thebes has fallen prey to a plague, which can only be 'solved' once the murderer of Laius is found and expelled. Oedipus finds the terrible truth, which leaves him so horrified that he cuts out his own eyes to not see his sin any longer.

    Oldboy, the 2003 South-Korean movie by Park Chan-wook can be seen as an adaptation of *Oedipus Rex* although in some sense, the two works couldn't be further apart; they were respectively made in ±430 BCE[3] and 2003 CE; in Greece and in South Korea; one is a theatre performance performed in the theatre of Dionysus on the Akropolis,[4] the other a movie played all over the world in cinemas, on tv's, laptops and phones; one tells of a Theban king, the other of a South-Korean salaryman. More specifically, a salary man who is mysteriously locked up in a hotel room for fifteen years with no explanation as to why. When the man, who is named Oh Dae-su, is finally released, he is given the assignment to find the reason for his imprisonment. Oh Dae-su is very determined to find the truth, and moreover, to take revenge. In his search he gets the help of a girl, Mi-do, with whom he falls in love. After an aggressive and violent quest, Oh Dae-su discovers that his imprisoner is Lee Woo-jin, an old classmate who kept an incestuous relationship with his sister. Dae-su once saw them together, and spread a rumor about it, which led to her suicide. As revenge, Woo-jin wants him to experience the same, and so we find out that Mi-do is actually Dae-su's daughter. Upon finding this truth, Dae-su breaks down and in subordination to Woo-jin, cuts out his own tongue, to never speak "too much" again.

    Although the setting and story seem wildly different, some striking similarities can be seen in the themes and structure of the story. In this thesis, I will discuss how *Oldboy* and *Oedipus Rex* relate to each other regarding two features that play respectively on the level of the story and the fabula: the organization of the plot and the question of freedom and necessity, two features that are closely connected as we will see later. I will make this comparison by analyzing first two passages from *Oedipus Rex* and then their equivalents in *Oldboy*. I will make this analysis with the help of Aristotle's *Poetica*; by

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[2] All translations from Greek are mine, unless mentioned otherwise.
[3] See Finglass 2018, 1-6 for a discussion of the dating of Sophocles' work.
[4] Finglass 2018, 6-7.

discussing Aristotle's ideas about plot and character, we will see not only how both Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* seem to closely 'follow' Aristotle's theory, we will also see how these two features are manifested in both works. In this way, I will demonstrate how the way of telling the story, and the story itself – the 'how' and the 'what' – strengthen each other.

1.1 Status Quaestionis

Upon its release, *Oldboy* received a lot of appraisal both in South Korea as from western audiences. Next to winning several awards in Asia, among which 'best director' at the Asia Pacific Film Festival, the film also received the 'Grand Prix' at Cannes. Taking in account its wide success, it is no surprise that I am not the first to make a comparison between Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy.* This comparison is, however, mostly made by South-Korean critics and scholars.[5] In English-language scholarship the comparison also exists, although less frequently, and often by people of Korean origin.[6] In western movie reviews this theme seems completely absent.[7] What is more, in all cases the comparison seems to be made from the perspective of Media Studies, Korea Studies or Psychology.[8] This is why I want to add to the existing scholarship with my research of *Oldboy* as a modern adaptation of *Oedipus Rex* by doing it from the perspective of reception studies, and see how the relationship between both texts actually works.

As said, I will focus my comparison on the question of freedom and necessity, an often-discussed theme in *Oedipus Rex*. This theme deals with two contradicting views that the tragedy evokes; it tries to answer the question if Oedipus himself is responsible for the course of events or that it was predestined by Apollo. Throughout the tragedy, there are three oracles that influence the course of events: because of an oracle, Laius chose to have his child killed, resulting in Oedipus' survival. He then grew up to fulfil the oracle by killing his father and taking his throne. Because of an oracle, Oedipus makes the choice to leave Corinth, which results in the fulfilling of it: he kills his father and sleeps with his mother. Because of an oracle, Oedipus starts looking for the killer of king Laius, which results in his discovery of the truth.[9]

On the one hand, the tragedy could thus be read in a determinist way: the gods (more specifically: Apollo) have fated the course of events with their oracles, leaving no other outcome. On the other hand, Oedipus willfully makes choices to effectuate his 'fate'. The first reading used to be a popular one,[10] although scholars today mostly suggest a coexistence of the two and/or annul the contradiction of the two.[11] The question is up until today a great point of interest in the study of Sophocles´ *Oedipus Rex* and because of the unsolvable and philosophical nature of the question, it will probably remain that way. In this research it is not my goal to give my own interpretation of the problem.

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[5] i.e. Kim 2009, who compares the idea of family in *Oedipus Rex* and *Oldboy*, and Byun 2003 who reviews the movie as a 'mythological tragedy'. It must said that my access to the Korean scholarship and critique is limited, because of my deficient knowledge of Korean. I have, however, tried to find the topics and ideas that exist on this comparison.

[6] Hee-Seung Lee 2016.

[7] See Hwang 2018 for a comparison of the Korean and American reception of the movie.
Bond (unknown), however, deserves credit for making an interesting video essay on youtube with an analysis of the relationship between the two works, mentioning also Aristotle. See Sung 2011 for a discussion of Orientalism and Othering in the Euro-American reception of *Oldboy*.

[8] See Jeon 2009 and Hwang 2003 for a psychological reading of *Oldboy*.

[9] The oracles are given in S. *OT* 711-714; S.*OT* 791-793; S. *OT* 95-107. See Dawe 2006, 4-6 and March 2020, 25-28 for clear discussions of the theme.

[10] For example Freud 1900, 169 and Bowra 1944, 162-211.

[11] Famously Dodds 1966, but also Reinhardt 1979, 134, Winnington-Ingram 1980, 173-178 and March 2020, 37, among others.

Rather I will show its relevance by researching how the question is manifested in two rather distant works of art.

1.2 Theoretical framework

Intertextuality

For this comparative research it must of course be stated that we are dealing with intertextuality, the study of the relationship between texts. Since I will study Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* as a reworking of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, we must first address the theory through which I'm able to do this. Because although Park Chan-wook has admitted in an interview that he took inspiration from Greek mythology, and consciously made the name of his main character (Oh Dae-su) resemble the name of Oedipus,[12] he hasn't said a lot more about the connection of his film with the Greek tragedy.

What right do I have, then, to describe *Oldboy* as a reworking of *Oedipus Rex*? This is where the study of intertextuality comes in, and especially the work of Barthes and his famous concept of 'the Death of the Author'. This concept, written about in his piece ´Image-Music-Text', opposes to the then (and quite often also now) popular idea that "the *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the *author* "confiding" in us".[13] With the ´Death of the Author´, Barthes means we should move away from seeing the author as the creator of all meaning of the text, and rather see the text in itself as the only holder of truth, thereby making interpretations of the text the responsibility of the reader, in which the author holds no power.[14] In this research, then, I will interpret *Oldboy* as a text in itself, trying to find meaning in the comparison with another work, *Oedipus Rex.*

To make the comparison, I will make use of the theoretical framework and terminology regarding intertextuality that Gerard Genette describes in his 'Palimpsests: literature in the second degree'. As mentioned, we are studying the relationship between texts, which I called intertextuality before, but which is alternatively called transtextuality by Genette.[15] He introduces us to five types of 'transtextual relationships': (1) intertextuality, which talks about the presence of one text in another by means of quoting, plagiarism or allusion; (2) paratextuality, which talks about all the information that is not the text itself, i.e. titles, covers, layout etc.; (3) metatextuality, which covers commentaries; (4) hypertextuality, which I will come to describe in more detail; and (5) architextuality, which talks about the generic perception of a text, which is communicated most often via a title or undertitle, i.e. "a novel". Of these, especially the fourth, hypertextuality, is useful to us: this describes how a text A (the hypertext) is derived from another preexisting text B (the hypotext). Genette says: "What I call hypertext, then, is any text derived from a previous text either through simple transformation, which I shall simply call from now on *transformation*, or through indirect transformation, which I shall label

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[12] Choi 2008.

[13] Barthes 1977, 143.

[14] Loosely paraphrasing the introduction to *Lampas* 55, 333. This description of Barthes´ theory is of course extremely short and illustrative; for interesting discussions of the concept, see Allen 2022, 59-91 and De Pourcq 2022.

[15] Thereby breaking with the trend of calling this field of study 'intertextuality'. See Allen 2022 for an introduction in the study of intertextuality and especially 1-8 for his interpretation of the term. From now on I will follow the terminology of Genette 1982.

imitation."[16] The so-called 'transformation' is used to describe a text that writes "the same thing but differently", so a text that takes over the same action as the hypotext, but describes it in a different way. 'Imitation' is, then, "saying another thing similarly": a hypertext that tells of a different action, but tells it in a similar way, following the generic model of the hypotext. Now it must be said that the relationship between these two types of hypertextuality (and the other types of transtextuality) is complex, which means they are not always so clearly distinguishable as described here: they can interlace and a text can show signs of both. This happens in *Oldboy*; although there are certain similarities in story (like a transformation), the most striking similarities between the two works are in the way it is presented (like an imitation). The connection between these works is not only visible in the "what" of the stories, but also in the "how", in this way showing *Oldboy* as both a transformation and imitation of *Oedipus Rex.*

Narratology

The last piece of theoretical terminology that needs to be introduced here is narratology. Although the comparison of *Oedipus Rex* and *Oldboy* will be made via the 'rules' of Aristotle's *Poetica* (functioning in that way as a theoretical framework), some more terminology for narratological analysis might be of help. In the analysis of passages from both works in the later chapters, I will make use of the terminology of Irene de Jong, as described in her practical guide 'Narratology and Classics'. In the guide, de Jong defines a text as a narrative by the presence of a narrator. Now of course, in *Oedipus Rex* – a tragedy – there is no narrator. [17] In *Oldboy* there is one, although seldom heard. De Jong shows however, how also in drama there can be place for narratology, for example in messenger speeches, a perfect example of a narrative (by a narrator) embedded in the drama. However, there are scholars who see a possibility to use narratology in drama not only through a narrator (like a messenger)[18] and de Jong explains their argument as follows: "Drama makes use of the same devices that are found in narrative, such as analepses and prolepses, space, and characterization. In particular, drama also revolves around a plot, a series of events caused or experienced by characters that has a beginning, middle, and end. The presence of these devices, they claim, can be explained only by assuming a central controlling and selecting mind, a 'narrator', and their working can be analyzed only with the help of narratology."[19] Now, because I will exactly research these topics in this comparison (so the thoughtful characterization and the organization of the plot) and the narratological concepts de Jong discusses can be applied without problem there, I agree with this argument.

The most important terms that I will use in this thesis relate to the vertical structure of a narrative: first the *text*, which is the product as it is communicated to the audience, which tells a *story* (the second level), told to a narratee by a narrator. Third, there is the *fabula*, which is a reconstruction of all the events relevant to the narrative in chronological order. The vertical structure of a narrative can be a very useful way to dissect and analyze a narrative. However, these terms are also problematic since they are not always clearly discernable; it can be difficult to determine the border between the structuring of the events and the events themselves (the levels of story and fabula).[20] Still I believe these terms will be a good framework for my comparison because quite often, the distinction *can* be made clearly and in my comparison this will help to understand how necessity and probability are present on

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[16] Genette 1982, 7. The other for types of transtextual relationships Genette describes are: Intertextuality (which talks about the presence of one text in another by means of quoting, plagiarism or allusion), paratextuality (which talks about all the information that is not the text itself, i.e. titles, covers, layout etc.), metatextuality (which covers commentaries) and architextuality (which talks about the generic perception of a text, which is communicated most often via a title or undertitle, i.e. "a novel").

[17] See Markantonatos 2012 for an analysis of the storytelling techniques of Sophocles.

[18] For example Ricoeur 1984, 36.

[19] De Jong 2015, 198.

[20] This problem is addressed and debated by Szilas 2022.

different levels in the narrative. I will therefore try to address the moments where the distinction is hard to make.

Furthermore, I will discuss *focalization* in *Oedipus Rex* and *Oldboy*, the study of "who sees": through whose experience are we taken into the narrative? Who colors the narrative, and how? De Jong describes it as follows: "the viewing of the events of the fabula is called focalization: there is the seeing or recalling of events, their emotional filtering and temporal ordening, and the fleshing out of space into scenery and persons into characters."[21] Focalization will be a useful tool to help understand how the audience perceives both works and how exactly then, necessity and probability are communicated.

1.3 Outline

With this theoretical framework in mind, let us move on to the analysis. For this analysis I will, in the following chapter, discuss Aristotle's *Poetica* to understand the terms 'Necessity' and 'Probability', that will be the basis of our comparison. Making an assessment of a contemporary work via an ancient framework of course brings its difficulties, most of which stem from the fact that Aristotle's work is written about Greek tragedy specifically, not other forms of narrative. Furthermore there is the problem that modern narratology differs strongly from Aristotle's ancient model.[22] However, in this analysis I will only focus on (parts of) the aspects plot and character, since these *can* be applied to modern narrative and moreover, they will prove to be a very useful model to see how on the level of story, necessity and probability are effectuated. How exactly this works will become clear in the analyses of *Oedipus Rex* and *Oldboy*.

I will start with a chapter on Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, in which I will discuss two passages: the oracle that Oedipus receives predicting parricide and incest, and the monologue in which Oedipus explains his self-blinding. These passages will serve as a great starting point to discuss how necessity is effectuated in various ways both on the level of the fabula and of the story, in characterization and the structuring of events. In chapter four then, I will analyze Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*, following the same structure to see how this film, by playing with the same themes in interesting ways, can be seen as a modern imitation of *Oedipus Rex*. I will end this thesis with an assessment of my findings in the conclusion.

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[21] De Jong 2015, 47. De Jong employs a rather broad definition of focalization. According to her, narratives without focalization do not exist. Not all scholars agree on this, see for example Belfiore 2000 for a counterargument.

[22] See Belfiore 2000 for an extensive discussion of this problem.

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2 Plot and Character in Aristotle's *Poetica*

As said before, the comparison between *Oedipus Rex* and *Oldboy* will be made through Aristotle. More specifically, passages from both works will be tested on two Aristotelian principles: necessity (τὸ ἀναγκαῖον) and probability (τὸ είκός). These are two prominent principles that Aristotle employs in his description of plot and character. In his *Poetica* (written around 335 BC)*,* Aristotle explains what can be considered a (good) tragedy. He does this based on the six components of which a tragedy consists: plot, character, spoken word, thinking, visual design and song, also in that order of importance.[23] The first two components will be our focus, not only to limit the scope of this comparison or because they are most fit to be the basis of a comparison between two different works of art (tragedy and film), but also because Aristotle himself deems them the most important components of the tragedy.

In the treatise, Aristotle mentions *Oedipus Rex* multiple times as a good example of a tragedy.[24] For example, Aristotle praises *Oedipus Rex* for the constitution of Oedipus' character.[25] It is no secret that *Oedipus Rex* is one of Aristotle's favorite tragedies.[26] Therefore, when making an analysis of Aristotelian concepts in *Oedipus Rex*, it will be of no surprise that these concepts will be highly represented. Aristotle formed the theory of the *Poetica* while looking at the tragedies that are ´good´ in his eyes. To prove that the two are closely connected, then, is not my goal. My goal is to analyze *how* these Aristotelian ideas are manifested in *Oedipus Rex* (and later *Oldboy*). Because, even though Aristotle might have based (part of) his *Poetica* on the tragedy, his work has culminated in an independent, conceptual model that can be applied not only to all ancient Greek tragedy, but also, as we will see, modern interpretations of it.

2.1 Plot

Aristotle gives us several functions of a good plot: for example, it should depict actions that evoke fear and pity; the *dramatis personae* experience a twist of fate (περιπέτεια) – from happy to unhappy or the other way around – , or they shift from ignorance to insight through a sudden recognition (άναγνώρισις). In the best case the peripeteia and anagnorisis coincide.[27] Next to all these well-known concepts, maybe the most famous one is the unity of action. According to Aristotle, a tragedy is a complete action (πράξις). Action, or *praxis* here, is a fluid concept: it is both the 'incidental' actions that motivate the plot, and the whole of the plot.[28] What this action depicts, is an imitation (μίμησις) of life, since according to Aristotle, this is the goal of all forms of art.[29] So, a tragedy is an imitation of life in the shape of 'one action'. Then what does this whole, this 'unity of action' mean? This is perhaps best explained by Aristotle himself:

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[23] See Davis 1947, 43-47, who discusses Arist. *Poet.* 1449b31-1450b20: the passage of the *Poetica* where the six parts of a Tragedy are discussed.

[24] Arist. *Poet.* 1452a22-26; 1452a32-33; 1453b3-7; 1453b29-31; 1454b6-8; 1455al6-18; 1460a26-30; 1462a18 1462b2.

[25] Oedipus' character, in accordance with what Aristotle deems 'good', is of high descent and a bit 'better' (βελτίονος) than us (Arist. *Poet.* 1453a7-17).

[26] See White 1992 for an in-depth discussion of Aristotle's tragedies, focusing mostly on *Oedipus Rex* and *Iphigeneia in Tauris.* See Wright 2012, 595-599 for a discussion of Sophocles in ancient criticism.

[27] Arist. *Poet.* 1451b32-1452b13. Aristotle mentions *Oedipus Rex* as an example of where άναγνώρισις and περιπέτεια coincide.

[28] Cf. Halliwell 1998, 140-142, where he discusses Aristotle's use of the word *praxis* in more detail.

[29] How the term *mimesis* should be understood and what it implies, is, like all terms Aristotle employs, a point of debate. See Davis 1947, 25-33, Woodruff 1992 73-95 and Halliwell 1998, 109-137 for elaborate discussions on *mimesis*.

χρὴ οὖν, καθάπερ καὶ ἐν ταῖς ἄλλαις μιμητικαῖς ἡ μία μίμησις ἑνός ἐστιν, οὕτω καὶ τὸν μῦθον, ἐπεὶ πράξεως μίμησίς ἐστι, μιᾶς τε εἶναι καὶ ταύτης ὅλης, καὶ τὰ μέρη συνεστάναι τῶν πραγμάτων οὕτως ὥστε μετατιθεμένου τινὸς μέρους ἢ ἀφαιρουμένου διαφέρεσθαι καὶ κινεῖσθαι τὸ ὅλον· ὃ γὰρ προσὸν ἢ μὴ προσὸν μηδὲν ποιεῖ ἐπίδηλον, οὐδὲν μόριον τοῦ ὅλου ἐστίν. (1451a30-35).[30]

Like in the other arts of *mimesis*, then, there is a single imitation of one thing. So, also the story, since it is an imitation of an action, must be a *mimesis* of one thing and of the whole of it. Moreover the parts of the actions must be arranged in such a way that when one part of it is transposed or removed, that the whole is destroyed and disturbed; because if the presence or absence is unremarked, it is not part of the whole.

So, the plot of a good tragedy is one complete action, in which all incidents must add to the plot. This suggests a sort of 'chain of events',[31] in which all displayed events have a cause and effect that together form the plot. As Halliwell puts it: "Unity arises out of the causal and consequential relations between the actions or events of a tragedy, and it is the connective sequence of these events which constitutes the intelligible structure that Aristotle terms both the action and the plot-structure."[32]
In other words, a good plot relies on probability (εἰκός), and necessity (ἀνάγκαῖον). These terms again need some further explanation. Aristotle mentions them multiple times throughout the *Poetica*, for example in 1450b26-31:

ὅλον δέ ἐστιν τὸ ἔχον ἀρχὴν καὶ μέσον καὶ τελευτήν. ἀρχὴ δέ ἐστιν ὃ αὐτὸ μὲν μὴ ἐξ ἀνάγκης μετ' ἄλλο ἐστίν, μετ' ἐκεῖνο δ' ἕτερον πέφυκεν εἶναι ἢ γίνεσθαι· τελευτὴ δὲ τοὐναντίον ὃ αὐτὸ μὲν μετ' ἄλλο πέφυκεν εἶναι ἢ ἐξ ἀνάγκης ἢ ὡς ἐπὶ τὸ πολύ, μετὰ δὲ τοῦτο ἄλλο οὐδέν· μέσον δὲ ὃ καὶ αὐτὸ μετ' ἄλλο καὶ μετ' ἐκεῖνο ἕτερον.

A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself necessarily follow from something, but after which a further event comes into being or happens; an end, on the contrary, is that which in itself follows after something else either from necessity or what happens for the most part, but after which nothing else follows; a middle, then, is that which in itself follows from something else and from which something else follows.

He adds in 1451a36-39:

φανερὸν δὲ ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων καὶ ὅτι οὐ τὸ τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τοῦτο ποιητοῦ ἔργον ἐστίν, ἀλλ' οἷα ἂν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον.

It is also clear from what has been said that telling things that *have* happened is not the job of a poet, but the *kind* of things that might happen and are possible based on probability and necessity.

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[30] For text passages of Aristotle I base myself on Lucas 1968.

[31] Cf. Bond (unknown), who discusses how both Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* are structured like an Aristotelian chain of events.

[32] Halliwell 1998, 144.

Narbonne 2018 gives an opposing view, stating: "the term "necessary" (one of the two components of the likely/necessary pair) carries a meaning here that is mainly metaphoric. This entails that there is *stricto sensu* no causal necessitation between the components of the narrative"(42). I agree with Narbonne that the necessity in Aristotle seems to be described as an ideal, but I do not think this means there is no causal necessitation between the components of the narrative, especially since no strong argumentation for what Aristotle's necessity *is*, is not given.

So, in the first citation we read that the concepts necessity and probability deal with the way events in the plot are connected. The causal link between the events that constitute the whole of the plot, is expressed by these concepts.[33] This is further expressed by the last citation: necessity and probability are ways to tell a story that did not happen, but is plausible because of the employment of the principles. Necessary then, means that the events in the story cannot occur otherwise, because a certain situation demands a certain outcome.[34]

From both these passages, it appears clearly that plot deals with the formal aspect of the tragedy, the organization of events. In that sense it seems very similar to the modern narratological term 'story'. From now on then, I will translate ὁ μῦθος as 'story' instead of as 'plot', since when it comes to necessity and probability, they come down to the same thing: they effectuate necessity and probability in the constitution of the events.[35]

Giving a specific and conclusive description of the two different terms is problematic (like all Aristotelian concepts), because, although employed often in the *Poetica*, they are mostly mentioned together, and Aristotle does not give us a clear clarification or differentiation between them. In giving my interpretation of the term, I take that fact then, to state that the terms must be very similar here. The term εἰκός, then, which I translate as probability, is employed in a similar way as necessity. This probability seems to be expressed as ὡς ἐπί τὸ πολὺ ('what happens for the most part') in the first of the two citations.[36] It appears that probability, like necessity, is employed to describe a way in which events should be related, but is a bit less restrictive: where according to necessity a certain event *has* to happen, according to probability it is *likely* that it happens. Sinnott calls this 'relative regularity' (regularidád relativa), a regularity that occurs in most cases.[37] This regularity, the likely, is effectuated in its effect on its perceiver: "si se da A, estimemos verosímil (εἰκός) o creíble (πιθανόν) que también se ha de dar B." Halliwell says on this: "*Eikos* represents, therefore, a degree of regularity or consistency which falls short of the invariable or the necessary."[38] So, probability is similar to necessity, but contains some more openness. It can, in that sense, sometimes even be defined as an "almost *necessity*."[39]

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[33] Cf. Sinnott 2020, 69: Lo que se ve como necesaria es la secuencia cuyos eslabones son hechos ya pasados, es decir, consumados, y todo ello por oposición a esos mismos hechos vistos como aún no consumados, es decir, vistos como hechos en ciernes y aún futuros, perspectiva desde la que los hechos aparecen como contingentes."

[34] Necessity and probability are terms that Aristotle not only employs in the *Poetica*, but also for example in the *Metaphysics Δ 5*, where he gives us four different types of necessity. Frede 1992, 199 summarizes them as follows: "(1) unqualified necessity of what "cannot be otherwise"(which Aristotle declares to be "in a way" the generic meaning of all that is necessary, 1015a35), (2) the necessity of brute force or compulsion (*bia*), (3) the "apodeictic" necessity of the conclusion of necessary premises, and (4) the hypothetical necessity of the preconditions for some end. Necessary in the primary and privileged sense." In the *Poetica* however, Aristotle seems mostly to employ this first definition of necessity. As Halliwell 1998, 101 says: "the beginning must be such that it leads necessarily or naturally to what follows after it."

[35] In this sense, I differ a bit from the explanation of story by De Jong 2015, 38, who explains story as follows: "… text contains a story, told to narratees by a narrator. The story he tells contains his version or focalization of a series of events that are either supposed to have taken place (the 'suspension of disbelief' characteristic of fiction) or that really have taken place (historiographical or biographical narratives)…". Story according to her, has more to do with focalization, although in my discussion the focus is more on the structuring of events. This structure of course can be (and is often) focalized, but not necessarily. Cf. Belfiore 2000, 48-53.

[36] Also in Arist. *Rhet.* 1357a34.

[37] Sinnott 2020, 60-61, as opposed to Narbonne 2018 (also mentioned in n.24).

[38] Halliwell 1998, 101.

[39] Frede 1992, 200. Frede, in his essay 'Necessity, Chance, and "What Happens for the Most Part"', goes on to problematize the terms coined by Aristotle. For the sake of this research, however, I choose to stick to the definitions above.

Thus, when applied to the story of a tragedy, we have seen that necessity and probability are effectuated in the sequence of events, in cause and effect: because of one event, there will, or must follow a next event, until the 'whole' of the story is reached.

2.2 Character

This is the point where we can see the entanglement of story and character, since the same principles of necessity and probability must be applied to how character is effectuated in a tragedy. On this, Aristotle says:

> χρὴ δὲ καὶ ἐν τοῖς ἤθεσιν ὁμοίως ὥσπερ καὶ ἐν τῇ τῶν πραγμάτων συστάσει ἀεὶ ζητεῖν ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον ἢ τὸ εἰκός, ὥστε τὸν τοιοῦτον τὰ τοιαῦτα λέγειν ἢ πράττειν ἢ ἀναγκαῖον ἢ εἰκὸς καὶ τοῦτο μετὰ τοῦτο γίνεσθαι ἢ ἀναγκαῖον ἢ εἰκός. (1454a33-37).

> In character, then, the same as in the putting together of events, one must always search either the necessary or the probable, so that a certain character says or does certain things that are either necessary or probable, and next to this that a certain thing happens that is either necessary or probable.

So, like with the story of a tragedy, also character needs to be based on the same principles of necessity and probability: characters in a tragedy should always act or speak *according to* their character. This way of seeing the role of character, however, is very different from modern notions of it. The strictness of the definition – based on necessity and probability – can be strange to modern audiences. Halliwell, in his monograph on Aristotle´s *Poetica*, dedicates a full chapter to ´Action and Character´. In it, he discusses this tension and explains that we should understand character (ἦθος) in Aristotle in a different way than we do today. Instead of the modern way of explaining character as individualistic and psychologizing, he explains that in Aristotle, contrastingly "character represents the ethical qualities of actions." Character in the *Poetica*, first of all, is a "matter of generic qualities", and second of all, "dramatic characterization … must involve the *manifestation* of moral choice in word or action."[40] We also see this in the passage: a character *does* or *says* things, and shows its character through those things. It is then also these actions that must rely on necessity and probability. This is different from how Aristotle approaches character in the *Ethica Nicomachea* and the *Rhetorica*, where he states that human decision and necessity stand in contrast.[41] However, we are dealing with tragedy here, an imitation of life. So, more specifically, we are dealing with dramatic character, which ideally *can* rely on necessity or probability because it is an imitation of life. Unlike in real life, a character is created by an author, and can thus be made to follow these principles, where a 'real' person cannot.[42]

Taking these things in account, we get to see two different levels on which character operates: the level of story and fabula. On the level of the fabula there is the 'generic qualities' of a character. Aristotle describes what these qualities should be for a good character in a tragedy. In *Poet.* 1454a16-28 he gives us four principles: (1) that the character is (morally) good (χρηστός), (2) that the character is appropriate (ἁρμόττων), for example to its gender or class, (3), that it is true-to-life (ὅμοιος), and (4) that it is consistent (ὁμαλός). When discussing the level of the story on the other hand, one looks at how these qualities manifest themselves: how, for example, the appropriateness or virtue of a character is made visible to an audience. The principles of necessity and probability then, are mostly relevant on

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[40] Halliwell 1998, 151-152.

[41] Arist. *EN* 3.1112b30-34; 4.1140a14; *Rhet*. 1368b33-1369a7.

[42] Cf. Narbonne 2018, 69-75, in a discussion on creative freedom in Aristotle's *Poetica*, concluding that "the aim of the poetics is not essentially prescriptive but descriptive"(74).

the level of story: it is by following these principles in the construction of the character during the play, that the qualities of a character are made visible to the audience. The principles here, mean that a character *has to* or *would probably* act in a certain way, given a certain situation.[43] Necessity and probability, according to Aristotle then, are concerned with the actions and characters *in their given circumstances*: these circumstances can be highly improbable (like the fabula of Oedipus is in itself quite improbable), but the characters responses (and so what happens) must be necessary or probable.

With these explanations in mind, we get to understand the relationship between character and story. The two are closely related, since "the true locus and realization of character is in action."[44] The events in the tragedy are manifestations of character. So we see how character, like the story, is defined by necessity and probability. Character in the *Poetica* is seen as a rather fixed thing;[45] the characters show their morality through choice. Given a certain situation, character *must* manifest itself in a certain moral decision. This of course seems paradoxical – a choice that could not have been otherwise – but it makes sense when related to different levels; on the level of fabula, the character makes a choice, whereas on the level of story, the author decides on this 'choice' of the character. This can be only one choice, since necessity and probability demand that the choices of the character demonstrate its specific qualities and if this could be done in multiple ways, the character is not really clear.

2.3 From Aristotle to Sophocles

In conclusion, we read in Aristotle's *Poetica* how both story and character are based on what is necessary (ἀναγκαῖον) and probable (εἰκός). In the story this mostly becomes clear in the way Aristotle describes a good story (or plot) as a unity of action, where the causal relationships between events together form a whole that cannot be otherwise. Character is closely linked to the action of the tragedy, since action comes from the decisions made by the characters. We should see the Aristotelian character as a fixed set of qualities that is manifested in a moral or ethical decision.

This model then, is very much concerned with the way of story-telling – the level of the story. We can already find some traces of the question of freedom and necessity which I briefly mentioned in the introduction. With a story that is based on necessity and probability, with characters that are fixed, we see a rather deterministic image of plot and character; if the start of a story *must* necessarily lead to a certain end, this makes for a restricted course of events. This relates to the way in which the *fabulae* of both *Oedipus Rex* and *Oldboy* deal with the question of freedom and necessity. One could say that this is, then, the result of a too rigid interpretation of Sophocles by Aristotle. Maybe this is true, but this is not the important thing here. I do not believe that Aristotle gives us a universal model for a good tragedy; he gives us *a* model that can – as said – be used independent of its ancient context, and is multi-applicable. Moreover, this model's deterministic and necessary tendency and its rootedness in Sophocles' tragedy make it the perfect model to discuss the narrative techniques of *Oedipus Rex* and its modern imitation *Oldboy* because it enables us to see how the themes of the works come back in the way the story is told.

In the following analysis of the works then, we will see how the specific stories interplay with the Aristotelian principles and how, next to necessity or determinism, we can also read freedom in these works.

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[43] For a more extensive analysis of character and characterization in Aristotle and in Greek tragedy, see Seidensticker 2008.
[44] Halliwell 1998, 149.
[45] See Webster 1969, 93-100 for a discussion of the permanence and change of character in Sophocles.

3 Analysis of *Oedipus Rex*

In our analysis of the Aristotelian concepts of necessity and probability in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex,* two passages from the tragedy will be our focus. The first passage is the oracle that Oedipus receives from Apollo, saying that he will kill his father and sleep with his mother, upon which Oedipus flees from his non-biological parents, Merope and Polybus, so that this will never happen. This is, of course, highly ironic, since this flight of Oedipus leads him to Thebes, eventually fulfilling this oracle. The second passage is the first monologue of Oedipus upon coming out of the palace, having just pierced out his eyes, telling us his sorrows and the reason for this dramatic action.

I have chosen these specific passages, first of all because they have an equivalent in *Oldboy*, which makes for a clear comparison. Next to this, I believe that these passages display very well the Aristotelian principles discussed before, and show the interesting tension between freedom and necessity on multiple narratological levels. I will demonstrate this by first discussing the level of the fabula and how freedom and necessity are present on that level. I will then continue with the level of the story to see how the narratological structure and characterization, by employing a Aristotelian necessity and probability, strengthen the themes that play on the level of the fabula. In the first passage, the focus will mainly on necessity and probability in the structuring of the events, while in the second passage, character and characterization will be of more interest.

3.1 Predictions: Apollo's oracle (S. *OT* 787-797)

The oracle that tells of Oedipus' murderous and incestuous fate is recounted in a monologue of Oedipus about halfway through the tragedy. Oedipus converses with Iocasta, who explains why Oedipus cannot be the murderer of Laius by recounting the details of his death. This, of course, only incites more concern for Oedipus and in a monologue (771-833) he tells of his murder at the place where three roads meet. To explain this, he first recounts his visit to Delphi, where he received no answer on his question about his parentage, but a prophecy of a horrible fate. He continues to recount his flight from Corinth and the murder of the mob of travelers and ends the monologue with a lament on the sorrowful fate that is his, if the implication that he murdered Laius is true. The receiving of the oracle itself is described by Oedipus as follows:

> λάθρᾳ δὲ μητρὸς καὶ πατρὸς πορεύομαι
>
> Πυθώδε, καί μ᾿ ὁ Φοῖβος ὧν μὲν ἱκόμην
>
> ἄτιμον ἐξέπεμψεν, ἄλλα δ᾿ ἀθλίῳ[46]
>
> καὶ δεινὰ καὶ δύστηνα προύφάνη λέγων,   790
>
> ὡς μητρὶ μὲν χρείη με μειχθῆναι, γένος δ᾿
>
> ἄτλητον ἀνθρώποισι δηλώσοιμ᾿ ὁρᾶν,
>
> φονεὺς δ᾿ ἐσοίμην τοῦ φυτεύσαντος πατρός.
>
> κἀγὼ 'πακούσας ταῦτα τὴν Κορινθίαν

---

[46] I believe the reading ἀθλίῳ is more plausible than ἄθλια, which has also been transmitted, following the arguments of Finglass 2018, 413, who highlights the "impact of the message on Oedipus himself" and Dawe 2006, 139, saying that this reading is "attractive in a sentence with προυφάνη λέγων."

ἄστροις τὸ λοιπὸν τεκμαρούμενος, χθόνα   795

ἔφευγον, ἔνθα μήποτ᾽ ὀψοίμην κακῶν

χρησμῶν ὀνείδη τῶν ἐμῶν τελούμενα.[47]

So without my mother and father knowing I went to Delphi, and Apollo sent me away deprived of what I'd come for, but he spoke and foretold terrible and unhappy things for wretched me; that I had to sleep with my mother, and would reveal progeny unbearable for the people to look upon, and I would be the murderer of the father who begot me. And I, after hearing these, I fled from the Corinthian land – from that time on determining its position by the stars – to a place where I should never see the shame of my terrible oracles fulfilled.[48]

Oedipus tells his audience what the oracle told him, which was not an answer to his question but something else: a horrifying fate for Oedipus and his family, which leads him to flee from Corinth. To quickly mention character in this passage, this choice to leave Corinth so that Oedipus would not see the prophecy fulfilled, shows us how he is quick-acting, determined, a logical thinker, and morally sound; he takes action immediately so a terrible thing doesn't happen.[49] In the second passage, then, we will discuss characterization in more detail.

Looking at the way necessity and probability play a role in this passage, the first thing that catches the eye on the level of text, is the use of the word χρείη to express the oracle: Oedipus 'has to' sleep with his mother. This gives a strong idea of determinism; it seems that Apollo really demands this course of events, which strengthens the idea of Apollo as a powerful actor.[50] This is further accentuated by the use of the words προύφάνη λέγων (790): the oracle is really spoken by Apollo (as the subject). Of course, in Delphi, the word of Apollo would be professed through a priestess, and we should read this in a metaphorical way, demonstrating the involvement and power of Apollo in the event.[51]

Fabula

Now, moving on to the level of fabula, necessity is again well-represented. Oedipus tells how he received an oracle that said he would sleep with his mother and kill his father. Dreading this horrible fate, Oedipus takes action so that this oracle will not become reality: he flees. The fact that this fate eventually does indeed turn out to be fulfilled points at some type of determinism at play. This demonstrates the question of freedom and necessity, which I briefly discussed in the introduction, the question if the gods (in this case Apollo) predetermine the course of events or if Oedipus himself has some power over his fate; in this passage we see on the one hand a god who demands a certain thing to happen through an oracle – that we eventually indeed find out to be fulfilled – but on the other hand we see a man who chooses to respond in a certain way: it is Oedipus himself who decides to leave Corinth behind, as he believes this to be the solution to his problem. In this sense he is free. Since both these aspects seem just as present in this passage, how should we interpret this tension?

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[47] S. *OT* 787-797. For all texts of Sophocles I base myself on Lloyd-Jones and Wilson 1990.
[48] Translations from Sophocles are loosely based on March 2020.
[49] Cf. Kitto 1966, 138-139.
[50] The word can be interpreted in a sense of 'fate' or 'destiny', mostly in the form τὸ χρῆν (according to LSJ). That the word χρείη here, is used to express Oedipus' fate/destiny is not strange, maybe even expected. However, destiny and necessity are strongly connected or moreover, interchangeable, so the use of χρείη here is still a strong indication of the presence of necessity.
[51] See also Finglass 2018, 413.

Dodds highlights the unconditionality of this oracle: "it did not say 'If you do so you will kill your father'; it simply said 'You will kill your father, you will sleep with your mother.' And what an oracle predicts is bound to happen."[52] So Oedipus, no matter how hard he tries, will have to meet his fate. It is, however, his own choice to act the way he does, as a "free agent", and it is through this that the fate eventually gets fulfilled; it seems that there is a coexistence of Oedipus' free character and divine determination. Winnington-Ingram believes otherwise. He says that we should see Oedipus' character – that manifests itself in the choices that are made – as under divine (or daemonic) influence, which results in an "interpenetration of the divine and human worlds", so that "there is a given factor in human character which is no less a part of man's destiny than those events which character may (or may not) help to mould."[53] Although scholars will not settle on one 'solution' for the problem, we do find that all arguments demonstrate the same problem: *Oedipus Rex* displays an interesting tension between choice and divine determinism.

Story

Having discussed two levels on which necessity is already represented, let us move on to the level of story, the level on which the Aristotelian principles, relating to the structuring of the events and characterization, are manifested. When we look at the story, we see a striking dramatic irony expressed in the words ἔνθα μήποτ᾽ … ἐμῶν τελούμενα (796-797). In the end of the tragedy, the second passage I will discuss in this chapter, Oedipus stabs out his own eyes precisely because he does not want to see his mistakes and his unhappy progeny.[54] This dramatic irony demonstrates how Sophocles is preparing his audience for the climax of the tragedy. By alluding to blindness earlier in the tragedy, the act of blinding is already present in the mind of the audience, before it actually happens, so the audience starts anticipating on it as something that *has to* happen. So, as we will see in the second passage in this chapter, where I will elaborate on this point more, Sophocles employs this dramatic irony to give a feeling of necessity to the course of events in the tragedy.

Now not only through dramatic irony, but also through the structuring of events we find this necessity and probability. It interesting that this piece of information about Oedipus' reason to leave Corinth is only given now, about halfway through the tragedy. Although remarks can be made as to the true-to-life-ness or appropriateness of the fact that Oedipus apparently never shared this information with Iocasta or Creon before,[55] within the action of the story, it adds up. This information is shared now, because it has to. When one tries to sketch the context of this passage, it is already clear how interlinked all the events are: the oracle is described because Oedipus is explaining his encounter with Laius. He explains this because Iocasta told him about the murder of Laius, because Oedipus was accused of being the murderer by Teiresias, because Oedipus was disrespectful to him… and so on. The causal link that

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[52] Dodds 1966, 41.

[53] Winnington-Ingram 1980, 177. For alternative visions see i.e. Dodds 1966, Reinhardt 1979, 134, Winnington-Ingram 1980, 173-178, Kovacs 2019, and March 2020, 37 for discussions of the problem.

[54] See Kirkwood 1994, 247-288 for an analysis of ´Sophoclean irony´.

[55] In the *Poetica*, there is one point where Aristotle (almost) criticizes *Oedipus Rex*: τούς τε λόγους μὴ συνίστασθαι ἐκ μερῶν ἀλόγων, ἀλλὰ μάλιστα μὲν μηδὲν ἔχειν ἄλογον, εἰ δὲ μή, ἔξω τοῦ μυθεύματος, ὥσπερ Οἰδίπους τὸ μὴ εἰδέναι πῶς ὁ Λάιος ἀπέθανεν ('Stories should not be composed of irrational parts, but should most of all have nothing irrational, and if it does, it should be outside the action of the play, like Oedipus' not knowing how Laius died', 1460a26-30). It is not 'true-to-life' or 'fitting' that Oedipus doesn't know anything about Laius' death, while he has been king of Thebes and husband to Iocasta for years. Although in this instance, the principles of Aristotle seem violated, he excuses this violation by saying it is okay because it is 'outside the action of the play' (it concerns a matter antecedent to the tragedy). See Margon 1976 for a discussion of this criticism/apology. Margon also explains how the passage discussed here can be given the same criticism: "it is untrue to life and inappropriate to a husband and wife relationship for him to be acquainting her for the first time with these fundamental and important circumstances" (252).

forms this 'chain of events', the story (or plot) is very clear; the events happen because they follow naturally from the preceding events, in this way very much following the Aristotelian ´rules´ for the story: 'all parts of the actions must be arranged in such a way that when one part of it is transposed or removed, that the whole is destroyed and disturbed.' We see this 'rule' clearly upheld in *Oedipus Rex*; it is a unity of action.[56]

We have seen how this scene displays the question of freedom and necessity: is Oedipus a playball of Apollo here, or does he have his own agency? Now this is where we come to see why Aristotle is so useful in analyzing this work, since I think there is a striking link in the way in which necessity is present on both the level of the story and the fabula in the tragedy. This tragedy in its content plays with the concepts freedom, necessity, determinism, by telling us of a man who makes choices that result in a god-given fate that he tried to evade. The story, then, is told in a manner that accentuates the 'inescapability' or 'inevitability' of this fate: it is constructed in such a way that events follow each other in a necessary way, like a 'chain of events', and by employing dramatic irony, which makes that with the start of this tragedy, no other outcome could have been possible, just like Aristotle de/-prescribes it. In this way, the 'what' and the 'how' of this work strengthen each other, constituting together a tragedy dealing with necessity in various ways.

3.2 The Cutting Scene: Oedipus' Blindness (S. *OT* 1369-1390)

Now let us move on to discuss how necessity is present in the second passage of Sophocles. This passage shows us Oedipus, who has come out of the palace after Iocasta has killed herself and he has stabbed his own eyes. After having bemoaned his own fate and getting pitiful responses from the choir, he starts a monologue to explain why he does not want to see anymore:

> ὡς μὲν τάδ᾽ οὐχ ὧδ᾽ ἔστ᾽ ἄριστ᾽ εἰργασμένα,
>
> μή μ᾽ ἐκδίδασκε, μηδὲ συμβούλευ᾽ ἔτι.   1370
>
> ἐγὼ γὰρ οὐκ οἶδ᾽ ὄμμασιν ποίοις βλέπων
>
> πατέρα ποτ᾽ ἂν προσεῖδον εἰς Ἅιδου μολὼν
>
> οὐδ᾽ αὖ τάλαιναν μητέρ᾽, οἷν ἐμοὶ δυοῖν
>
> ἔργ᾽ ἐστὶ κρείσσον᾽ ἀγχόνης εἰργασμένα.
>
> ἀλλ᾽ ἡ τέκνων δῆτ᾽ ὄψις ἦν ἐφίμερος,   1375
>
> βλαστοῦσ᾽ ὅπως ἔβλαστε, προσλεύσσειν ἐμοί;
>
> οὐ δῆτα τοῖς γ᾽ ἐμοῖσιν ὀφθαλμοῖς ποτε·
>
> οὐδ᾽ ἄστυ γ᾽, οὐδὲ πύργος, οὐδὲ δαιμόνων

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[56] Cf. Prufer 1992, 13-14, who continues his philosophical essay to discuss providence and imitation in Sophocles. See Pucci 1991 for a contrasting view; Pucci argues that "A family story, notwithstanding all parricides and subsequent recognitions, must have a rootless origin and an endless end." Of course a certain openness in this sense can be seen, since the familial ties of this tragedy make it a fabula that starts and ends (if they start or end at all) way before and after the tragedy. However, this is of course the fabula, and not the story. I still believe that on the level of story, the action of the tragedy is complete.

ἀγάλμαθ᾽ ἱερά θ᾽ ὧν ὁ παντλήμων ἐγὼ

κάλλιστ᾽ ἀνὴρ εἷς ἔν γε ταῖς Θήβαις τραφεὶς   1380

ἀπεστέρησ᾽ ἐμαυτόν, αὐτὸς ἐννέπων

ὠθεῖν ἅπαντας τὸν ἀσεβῆ, τὸν ἐκ θεῶν

φανέντ᾽ ἄναγνον καὶ γένους τοῦ Λαΐου.

τοιάνδ᾽ ἐγὼ κηλῖδα μηνύσας ἐμὴν

ὀρθοῖς ἔμελλον ὄμμασιν τούτους ὀρᾶν;   1385

ἥκιστά γ᾽· ἀλλ᾽ εἰ τῆς ἀκουούσης ἔτ᾽ ἦν

πηγῆς δι᾽ ὤτων φραγμός, οὐκ ἂν ἐσχόμην

τὸ μὴ ἀποκλῇσαι τοὐμὸν ἄθλιον δέμας,

ἵν᾽ ἦ τυφλός τε καὶ κλύων μηδέν· τὸ γὰρ

τὴν φροντίδ᾽ ἔξω τῶν κακῶν οἰκεῖν γλυκύ.[57]   1390

Do not explain to me that this was not done for the best, and give me no more advise! For I do not know with what eyes I could have seen and looked upon my father after going to Hades, or upon my unhappy mother, since towards them both I have done deeds that are too bad for hanging. Then, could I desire the sight of my children, born the way they were born? There would not ever be such a desire for my eyes! Nor the city, or the wall, or the statues of the gods or the temples, from which I, the most wretched of all, the man who enjoyed the greatest luxury in Thebes, withdrew myself, saying myself that all should drive that godless one away, the one whom the gods had shown to be defiled and of the race of Laius. After having proclaimed that such a stain was my own, was I supposed to look upon these with steady eyes? Never! But I there was a way to block the stream of hearing through my ears, I would not have hesitated to shut off my wretched body, so I would be blind and deaf. It is sweet to live with one's mind outside of disaster.

Fabula

This scene is the climax of the tragedy. All the events in the tragedy – the plague of Thebes, Oedipus' relentless search of the truth, and so on –lead to this self-blinding. On the level of fabula, this passage evokes some interesting themes. Once again, the question of freedom and necessity needs to be addressed because the choice that Oedipus makes here is very much his own, without divine control or incentive. This is a different situation than in the first passage, where it is clearly the word of Apollo that is the cause for (re)action by Oedipus, who unknowingly effectuates the prophecy in this way. In this passage however, although the parricide and incest was indeed fated by the gods, it is Oedipus himself who consciously decides to blind himself.[58] Does this however, mean that Oedipus here is really free? Or is there still some kind of necessity at play?

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[57] S. *OT* 1369-1390.

[58] Cf. Dodds 1966, 42: "Certain of Oedipus' past actions were fate-bound; but everything that he does on the stage from first to last he does as a free agent." This argument is even more convincing when related to Oedipus' earlier words: Ἀπόλλων τάδ᾽ ἦν, Ἀπόλλων, φίλοι, ὁ κακὰ κακὰ τελῶν ἐμὰ τάδ᾽ ἐμὰ πάθεα. ἔπαισε δ᾽ αὐτόχειρ νιν οὔτις, ἀλλ᾽ ἐγὼ τλάμων (It was Apollo, Apollo, my friends, who accomplished these cruel, cruel sufferings of mine! And no other struck my eyes with his own hand, but miserable me! 1329-1332).
Winnington-Ingram 1980, 174 says: "When he killed his father and wedded his mother, Oedipus was a victim of the gods, but, when he blinded himself, he was a free agent." But contrastingly adds: "How attractive to look at matters in this way, and how limited the truth of it may be!" This fits his argument that also the character of Oedipus – and thus the choices he makes – is under divine influence. However, even following this argument,

When we look at character in this first part of his lament, then, we hear how Oedipus justifies this decision; his self-blinding is simultaneously a punishment and a way to not see his mistakes. He argues how he could not bear to look upon his parents, his children and the city, since he has wronged them all. He blinds himself as a logical response to what he has found out: he is so ashamed by this truth that he cannot look upon his parents (even in Hades), his children, his city and the gods, since they are either the result of his error or the ones he wronged by it. His decision to blind himself seems then one based on shame and justice, giving himself the worst possible punishment; hanging would not be enough to atone for his sin: ἔργ' ἐστὶ κρείσσον' ἀγχόνης (1374).[59] With this, Oedipus, although grieved and emotional, shows his old character in this speech: the logical thinking we discussed before is clearly present in this well set out argument for his self-blinding, using even rhetorical tropes such as rhetorical questions and a tricolon. Next to this, Oedipus' authority is demonstrated by the two imperatives in the opening of the monologue (μή μ' ἐκδίδασκε, μηδὲ συμβούλευ' ἔτι , 1370).[60] Lastly, we see again how Oedipus is morally sound, Oedipus is too ashamed to see and feels the need to punish himself.

Story

On the level of story, we see a very Aristotelian characterization here. We have seen how the self-blinding is a moral decision, made in accordance with the specific qualities of Oedipus' character. Sophocles makes Oedipus act this way because this demonstrates his character. Like Halliwell said: "dramatic characterization … must involve the *manifestation* of moral choice in word or action." This is precisely what we see here: Oedipus, though affected in grave ways, keeps acting and speaking according to his characteristics (moral soundness, logic, determination) to demonstrate his character to the audience. Does this, however, mean that the self-blinding is necessary and probable? I think that in a way, it is. On the level of fabula, Oedipus could have responded differently to this painful truth, he could have gone away, or committed suicide. However, he is a logical, determined and morally sound man and we have seen how, according to Aristotle's rules, he should act that way. In this speech we get to understand how self-blinding is the only logical and morally sound response for Oedipus, how this choice fits his character. In this way, we come to see the self-blinding as necessary on the level of story; to demonstrate the qualities of his character, Oedipus has to blind himself, because another response would not suffice.

On the level of story we find next to this, that the blinding of Oedipus has been hinted at multiple times throughout the tragedy. The first passage we discussed refers implicitly to the self-blinding that will occur, but Oedipus himself is unaware of this. This is a good example of *paralepsis*: a character saying more than he knows, which creates a meaning for the audience that the character does not yet understand. Another beautiful example of an implicit reference to the self-blinding is Teiresias' statement earlier in the tragedy that Oedipus is 'blind in his ears and in his mind and in his eyes' (τυφλὸς τά τ' ὦτα τόν τε νοῦν τά τ' ὄμματ' εἶ, 371). This statement is twofold ironic: Oedipus does not yet know the truth of these words, he does not understand his own (metaphorical) blindness to his situation, whereas Teiresias, and the audience with him, do. Moreover, this statement reminds the audience of the actual blinding that is to happen just by the use of the word τυφλὸς. A more explicit example then, is the prediction of blindness that Teiresias makes later in that same scene (454-460). This is an explicit *prolepsis*, where Teiresias clearly marks a course of events that is to happen. Now, not only through references to blindness that the audience is reminded of Oedipus' fate. During the whole play, of course, the theme of blindness and sight is strongly present; as we have seen in the scene with Teiresias, we

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there is a significant distinction between the way Oedipus is influenced by divine power in the first passage and this one.

[59] Cf. Finglass 2018, 585.

[60] Cf. March 2020, 297.

are presented with a Teiresias that is blind but sees the truth, and an Oedipus that can see, but is blind to it. March then, describes the blind Oedipus in the end of the tragedy as "displaying himself to the world as the blind man he has been all along".[61]

This dramatic irony and foreshadowing, although not always overt determination, adds to the experience of the audience to perceive this self-blinding as deterministic: as I have tried to show, the self-blinding in various ways has been hinted at so often, the story *had* to end this way. Again, we find the question of freedom and necessity clearly represented. Although not so much fated by the gods, the play alludes or refers to the self-blinding several times before it happens, in this way adding to a perception of the self-blinding as necessary. Next to this, the self-blinding is shown as necessary when presented as a logical choice that fits the character of Oedipus. So we see that the principles of necessity and probability are present in the structuring of events and in characterization and moreover, that this presence strengthens the themes and questions that the tragedy evokes.

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[61] March 2020, 30. See also 28-30 for a brief discussion of tragic irony in *Oedipus Rex*.

οὐκ ἔστι θνητῶν ὅστις ἔστ᾽ ἐλεύθερος (E. *Hec.* 864)

There is no one amongst the mortals who is truly free.

4 Analysis of *Oldboy*

The themes of necessity and probability, which in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* have been so important, also play a crucial part in the understanding of the film *Oldboy*. In this chapter, then, we will discuss two scenes that could be seen as equivalents to the passages in *Oedipus Rex* we have just discussed. I will first discuss how these scenes show a tension between freedom and necessity on the level of fabula, and then I will analyze how on the level of story this theme is played with in various ways by employing the Aristotelian principles of necessity and probability. In the first scene I will mainly focus on the structure of the story, while in the second scene my main interest will be character (although I will briefly introduce characterization in *Oldboy* in the first scene). By doing this, I hope to show how *Oldboy* is an interesting modern imitation of *Oedipus Rex*, telling a story that is overall quite different from the Greek tragedy (except for some notable similarities which we will also discuss), but translating the essence of the tragedy by employing necessity and probability on multiple levels: as a theme and as a narratological device, which consequently strengthen each other; *Oedipus Rex* and *Oldboy* both ultimately deal with characters that struggle with the truth and higher powers that control them (be it the gods or a rich business-owner), and employ a same oppressive inevitability to convey this. Before starting the analysis, however, I will give a short overview of the film's storyline (highlighting the parts that are of relevance for our analysis), so that the following analysis can be interpreted better.

4.1 Overview of *Oldboy*

The story of *Oldboy* starts with a scene of Oh Dae-su (our main character) in a police station, detained for being drunk. After being bailed out by a friend he makes a call to his family in a phone booth and is then kidnapped. We see how Dae-su finds himself locked up in a hotel room, unaware of a reason for this imprisonment and of the duration of it – this turns out to be fifteen years. During these years we see how Dae-su tries to find the reason for his imprisonment by making a list of all the people he has wronged in the past and could have possibly done this to him, filling more than one notebook with this list. He also tries to escape the room by making a hole in the wall. During the whole imprisonment, Dae-su is being manipulated and closely watched. Every once in a while or when Dae-su tries to hurt himself, a gas enters the room and makes Dae-su unconscious. When he wakes up he finds himself healed, cleaned and with fresh cut hair. His attempts to free himself get thwarted when after fifteen years, having almost finished his escape route, he is released by his captors. Dae-su is part of the world again, but is he really free?

The first conversation between Dae-su and his captor is the first scene we will discuss. After this conversation, Dae-su starts a search for Woo-jin to find the reason behind his imprisonment and to take revenge. Dae-su gets a chance for revenge the first time he sees Woo-jin in person. He wants to kill Woo-jin but is stopped by Woo-jin's words, saying: 'You've been curious for fifteen years, are you still going to kill me?'. Dae-su lets Woo-jin go; although he wants his revenge, his need to find the truth is stronger in this moment. Woo-jin, in this confrontation, also gives Dae-su a deadline: he has five days to find out the reason for his imprisonment. Dae-su, with the help of Mi-do and an old friend tracks down the identity of Woo-jin. During this search, it becomes clear that Dae-su and Mi-do love each other and ultimately they consume this love. Together they find out that Woo-jin went to the same high school as Dae-su and in a flashback we see how Dae-su sees Woo-jin and his sister Soo-ah engage in sexual activity and tells his school friend about this afterwards. After this flashback it does not take Dae-su long to find Woo-jin for a final confrontation. After all, the five days have almost passed. In this final

confrontation we learn that Woo-jin's power is even larger than we already knew. The imprisonment was only the beginning of his enormous revenge-scheme against Dae-su, using among other things hypnosis to make Dae-su fall in love with Mi-do, who we find out to be Dae-su's daughter. The implications of this and Dae-su's reaction will be the second part of our analysis.

4.2 Predictions: Lee Woo-jin's Assignment

About twenty-five minutes into the movie, this first conversation between Oh Dae-su and Lee Woo-jin occurs. Oh Dae-su has just been released from his fifteen-year imprisonment, and wanders around the city to end up in a sushi shop. There he meets Mi-do, the sushi chef who from then on assists Dae-su and who becomes his love interest. Sitting at the counter, Dae-su receives a phone call with a ringtone that is the same melody that used to be played in his hotel room/cell. The phone has been given to him before entering the restaurant by an accomplice of Lee Woo-jin. He picks up and the following dialogue ensues:

> Oh Dae-su: Who are you?
> Lee Woo-jin: Do you like your clothes?
> O: Why... Why did you imprison me?
> L: Who do you think I am?
> O: Yoo Heung-sam?   5
> L: Wrong
> O: Did Lee So-young hire you?
> L: No, wrong again
> O: Lee Jong-yong? Kang Chang-suk? Hwang Joo-yeun? Kim Na-sung?
> Park Ji-woo? Im Duk-yoon? Lee Jae-pyung? Kuk Su-ran? Who the hell are you?   10
> L: Me? I'm sort of a scholar … And my major is you. A scholar studying
> Oh Dae-su. An expert on Oh Dae-su. Who I am isn't important. Why is important.
> Think it over. Review your whole lifetime. Since school is over it's time for your
> homework. Right?
> Keep this in mind: "be it a grain of sand or rock, in water they sink as the same".   15
> O: Let me ask you one thing. You hypnotized me in there didn't you?
> What did you do to me?
> L: I miss you... Hurry and come to me.[62]

We learn from this dialogue that Oh Dae-su wants to know who imprisoned him for all those years and is trying his best to find out what has been done to him. Lee Woo-jin, on the other hand, appears not to be done with his scheme against Dae-su: he gives him the assignment to find out the reason for the 'punishment', gives him clues ('be it a grain of sand or rock, in water they sink as the same', 15), and even asks Dae-su to hurry.

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[62] This English translation I took from Scriptorama, a website that offered a transcript of the movie, due to difficulties to obtain a copy of the film with English subtitles. I have compared this English translation with the one on my Dutch copy. This scene occurs about 24 minutes into the film.

Fabula

Taking a short look at character on the level of fabula in this scene (so the specific qualities of Dae-su and Woo-jin) we see that Dae-su shows himself as determined, wanting to find the person who did this to him to take revenge and when he does not get an answer to this, he tries to find out what actually happened to him. This determination is also demonstrated in the fact that he comes with a list of names to find out if one of those is the imprisoner. Earlier in the film we have seen Oh Dae-su compiling a list of possible perpetrators, people he had wronged in the past. This act shows us how Dae-su is willing to admit to his own past errors in a whim just to get closer to finding the person he can take revenge on. Woo-jin, on the other hand (who speaks here for the first time in the film), shows himself as powerful and almost godlike, but also evil. We find this in the dialogue above, in which Woo-jin positions himself on a level above Dae-su, studying and analyzing his moves and shows in this way how he is in control. Woo-jin seems to enjoy this morbid 'game' he is playing with Dae-su, in which he is the one who decides what happens. This becomes clear for example by his telling the rules of the 'game' and giving clues, but also in the way the contact is established: it is completely orchestrated by Woo-jin. The delivery of the phone, the conversation and all else that happens is completely planned out by Woo-jin.

On the level of fabula, we see next to this how this first scene shows us an interesting dilemma concerning freedom and necessity: we see a man who believes he is free, but is not. Dae-su has just been released from his fifteen-year imprisonment, he is finally part of the world again and takes this alleged freedom to find his imprisoner. However, Dae-su is not free at all; in the fabula, Dae-su's character is completely controlled and even created by Woo-jin. In that sense, Woo-jin acts like an author-figure, trying and succeeding in staging a Sophoclean tragedy for Dae-su.[63] We have seen, after all, how in the first part of the film Dae-su has been locked up in a room for fifteen years, treated quite horribly, which has led Dae-su to become the determined and vengeful person we see here. His character, then, is altered by this imprisonment. Before his imprisonment Dae-su was a salaryman with a drinking problem and as the list of names discussed above indicates, someone who wronged a lot of people. He was not the vengeful and determined person we see in this scene. We learn that this alteration has been carefully orchestrated by Woo-jin. For example, we find out later how during the imprisonment, he gave Dae-su medication so he would not 'lose his mind'. Woo-jin wanted to create someone vengeful and determined to take his own ultimate revenge and even hypnotized Dae-su to make sure he would meet and fall in love with Mi-do.[64] This scene then, the first contact between Dae-su and Woo-jin, is of importance, because it is the first time Woo-jin gives an indication of his everlasting power over Dae-su, even after his release.

Story

Continuing to the level of story, we see an interesting play with how this control is effectuated in the film. First of all, one important aspect of how this control is communicated to the audience is through focalization. In this film Dae-su is the focalizer, the audience does not know more than he does. We see this focalization through Dae-su for example in the fact that the film starts when Dae-su first gets involved in Woo-jin's revenge plan, even though the fabula starts way earlier (the moment when he witnessed the incestuous acts of Woo-jin and Soo-ah). The audience starts the story together with Dae-su. His focalization is furthermore apparent from camera angles: the camera most often follows the sight of Dae-su, so that quite literally see through his eyes. Also in editing we are made to see Dae-su's

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[63] Cf. Hee-Seung Lee 2016, who describes the far-reaching power of Woo-jin as a means to understand this film as a portrayal of revenge from a psychological point of view.

[64] This idea is highlighted several times by statements of the characters. Dae-su, after attacking and slaughtering a mob in a hallway (accomplices of his imprisoner) later in the movie, says: 'I've now become a monster. When my vengeance is over, can I return to the old Oh Dae-su?' Later on, in their first in-person confrontation, Woo-jin tells Dae-su: 'you're the monster I created'.

experience, for example in scenes of flashbacks, relating memories of Dae-su on the moment he is thinking of them.[65] Dae-su is the one we identify with when watching this film.

Because of this focalization through Dae-su, an interesting tension between story and fabula comes into being that is related to our point of interest, necessity; the story very much follows the Aristotelian principles of necessity and probability, but we only discover this in the end of the movie. When seeing this scene for the first time, necessity and probability might not seem too prominent in some aspects of the plot here. Dae-su seems to enter the sushi restaurant by chance, gets a phone call out of the blue and is left puzzled and angry. He wants to eat ´something alive´ and passes out after eating a live octopus to then be taken to sushi chef Mi-do's house, who tries to take care of him because 'by chance' she likes him. However, when one knows the entire fabula, we see again that all these events are not at all 'by chance', but part of the elaborate scheme Woo-jin has set out. The events that occur turn out to be necessary and probable: Dae-su and Mi-do had been hypnotized, which explains why it was this specific restaurant Dae-su went to, and why Mi-do felt the need to take him home when he passed out. So, Aristotle's principles are maintained even though we do not recognize it yet.

Now, even though we do not fully realize this necessity yet, we do *feel* it throughout the film. We are confronted with a sense of inevitability from the beginning of the film; the title screen is surrounded by clocks and accompanied by ticking noises. This seems to tell us that it is only a matter of time before the truth comes out and there is no way to evade it. Of course we see it also in the beginning of the film, when Dae-su is imprisoned and meticulously surveyed by (as far as the audience knows) someone or something. Also the scene we are discussing here, although its occurrence at first can seem random or 'by chance', *does* clearly add to a feeling of necessity by giving some indication of a higher power (in this case a person) that is in control of what happens: as an audience we come to understand, like Dae-su does, that there is someone able to track him down, contact him, and give him assignments. In various ways, the viewer is reminded and confronted with a yet unidentified control that we uncover together with Dae-su as the story unfolds.

Also the editing of the film adds to this feeling of inevitability. The story in this film has a high pacing; a lot of information is given in short amounts of time and the story develops fast. This scene is also a good example of how the way in which characters speak adds to this feeling: they speak shortly, but dense with information. These things are good examples of how in film, more than in theatre, there is great freedom to determine the relationship between story and fabula through editing. In editing, it is easy to make jumps in time and space by cutting scenes, sometimes even telling showing multiple places or characters simultaneously.[66] In other words, editing gives a great range of possibilities in structuring the story. In this film we see how the rhythm is high: scenes are often rather short and jumps in time are often made to just show us the necessary things.[67] This denseness, or 'to-the-pointness' of this film, then, clearly matches Aristotle's ideas on the unity of plot. The idea that 'the parts of the actions must be arranged in such a way that when one part of it is transposed or removed, that the whole is destroyed and disturbed; because if the presence or absence is unremarked, it is not part of the whole', is very much effectuated by this way of editing.

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[65] For example the flashback to his conversation with Soo-ah in high-school (about 76 minutes into the movie) or his memories of saying goodbye to Mi-do before the big confrontation with Woo-jin (at around 86 minutes).

[66] See Verstraten 2009, 78-95, in his book on Film Narratology for a chapter on 'Story and Fabula Disconnected through Editing' to find more on the techniques that can be used in editing to 'play' with the time of the film. See Chatman 1980 for a discussion of narratology in film (in a comparison with literature), highlighting the different ways in which different mediums can evoke the object of their narratives.

[67] A good example of this is a sequence of short scenes in which Dae-su visits multiple restaurants with the same name to taste their dumplings. To explain this endeavor, we see only a flashback of a few seconds of Dae-su, still imprisoned, eating dumplings from a restaurant called 'blue dragon', parallel to a shot of him eating dumplings in the present time.

Oldboy has often been praised for its story-telling, for its strong narratological structure.[68] I believe what I have described above is one example of that; the way in which the story is given shape following Aristotelian ideas (whether it be knowingly or unknowingly) adds to a sense of inevitability or necessity, which is also very present on the level of fabula. So we see how necessity is very prominent on multiple levels in this film. The power Woo-jin holds over Dae-su is not recognized by Dae-su and the audience with him, but through narratological tools, the inevitability of the course of events is felt.

When we compare these findings with what we have seen in *Oedipus Rex*, there is an interesting similarity; it is clear that on the level of the fabula, both works deal with a tension between freedom and necessity, enforced by either Apollo or Woo-jin. Then, on the level of story, we see how both works employ Aristotelian necessity and probability to structure the story as a chain of events that feels inevitable, contributing in that way to the tension that is present on the level of the fabula. However, there is a big difference, and that lies in the focalization. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus himself is the focalizer. However, it is striking that the audience of *Oedipus Rex* knows Oedipus' truth and fate already.[69] The fact then, that the audience knows so much more than the main focalizer of the story, makes that the dramatic irony that is so strongly present in that tragedy, is even more felt by the audience. In *Oldboy*, this play with dramatic irony has no similar role; [70] We, like Dae-su, do not know the truth, or what is to happen. There is only a feeling of inevitability, until the full extent of Woo-jin's power is revealed. This will then be the second scene we will discuss.

4.3 The Cutting Scene: Oh Dae-su's Supplication

In the second scene we see an interesting reversal of Dae-su's understanding (it is both a *peripeteia* and an *anagnorisis)*. Dae-su, has found the truth and finally understand the extent of Woo-jin's power. This also means he understands his need to supplicate himself to Woo-jin. After accusing Woo-jin of having sex with his sister and then killing her when she got pregnant (which we later find to be false, Soo-ah committed suicide), Woo-jin tells him that Soo-ah´s pregnancy was a phantom-pregnancy, fueled by the rumors of their incestuous relationships. He says: 'Your tongue got my sister pregnant'. He shows Dae-su a photo album, through which Dae-su learns that Mi-do is his lost daughter, raised by Woo-jin since she was three. Dae-su's response is understandably emotional. He first gets angry and tries to attack Woo-jin. Then, however, he realizes that Mi-do is still unaware of this and realizes how much power Woo-jin holds, who can let Mi-do know this truth with one phone call. A monologue ensues in which Dae-su goes through a spectrum of emotions. Dae-su, in his despair, takes different approaches to Woo-jin. He begs him to not let Mi-do know anything, then threatens him ('I'll rip your whole body apart!'), tries to appeal to Woo-jin's nostalgia by reminding him of their shared time in school by singing the school anthem, and finally supplicates himself by acting as Woo-jin's dogs, telling him he will do anything Woo-jin wants.[71] Dae-su grabs a pair of scissors and proceeds to cut out his tongue.

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[68]For example Ebert 2005 and Schuttinga 2022. See Hwang 2018, 1508 for an assessment of Korean reviews that deal with the narrative structure of *Oldboy*.

[69] See Finglass 2018, 13-27 for an account of earlier attestations of the myth of Oedipus, from which we learn that it is highly probable that Oedipus' parricide, the relationship with his mother *and* his self-blinding were well-known to the audience that went to see the tragedy.

[70] Although, dramatic irony can be found in the film. Before Dae-su leaves for his final confrontation with Woo-jin, Mi-do says: 'Please make Woo-jin kneel for Dae-su and beg for forgiveness'. In the end we find that the opposite of this actually happens. So, dramatic irony is present, but not yet read as such by the audience.

[71] This scene occurs around 102 minutes into the movie.

Fabula

We see how on the level of fabula, the tension between freedom and necessity is fundamental. This act is the gruesome climax of the film that shows a clear similarity with Oedipus' self-blinding. It seems to be the ultimate gesture of his supplication: after saying he is Woo-jin's slave dog, begging, getting down on his knees and kissing Woo-jin's shoes, he now accommodates his wishes to full extent. It was after all 'Oh Dae-su's tongue' that was the cause of all Woo-jin's problems. By cutting his tongue out then, Dae-su knowingly submits himself to Woo-jin's truth. This is the first time that this happens, since up until now, we have only seen Dae-su trying to get his own revenge, and hunting down Woo-jin for that purpose. Although we have already seen how in fact this way of acting has been influenced and even established by Woo-jin, Dae-su believed himself to be free to hunt down and take revenge on Woo-jin, constantly making choices to find the truth and subsequently get revenge. In this scene however, Dae-su finally realizes that he is completely in Woo-jin's power and has to supplicate himself in order to prevent Mi-do from uncovering the same horrible truth. The situation is quite paradoxical: Dae-su is more free since his actions are no longer directed by Woo-jin, but he recognizes his own powerlessness and need to supplicate to Woo-jin.

The vengeful and determined character of Dae-su that we saw in the first scene is still present in here, given his threats towards Woo-jin and his extreme efforts to resolve the situation, but he eventually sees that he needs to supplicate himself and in order to do so he cuts off his tongue. On the level of fabula, this decision of Dae-su then, is necessary: he needs to do *this* to save Mi-do from knowing a horrible truth. Woo-jin here, is as godlike and evil as before; he still has complete control over Dae-su and visibly enjoys his misery.

Story

When we look at character on the level of story, then, we see how they are manifested through an Aristotelian conception of necessity and probability. However strange these characters may be on the level of fabula, on the level of story their (re)actions in this situation *are* probable and necessary: they are clear manifestations of their specific characteristics. Dae-su shows his determinism and love for Mi-do by cutting out his tongue, Woo-jin shows his power by doing nothing but laughing at Dae-su and waiting for him to do what he wants. Here we see very clearly how Aristotle's ideas on necessity play an important role in this film: if characters *have to* naturally respond to certain situations in certain ways, we can understand how Woo-jin's power works: if he knows Dae-su and has the power to shape Dae-su's situation, he can control him since he knows what his reaction will be.[72] And he does; he knows Dae-su, he even shaped his character by watching and controlling him for fifteen years, and then afterwards by hypnotizing him and making him fall in love with Mi-do. It is in this moment that the audience realizes that Woo-jin really is the author of Dae-su's story; we see that it is Woo-jin who created Dae-su's wishes and fears, and so can control his every move, *because* of necessity and probability, following precisely Aristotle´s principles: Woo-jin, in that way, exploits the fact that Dae-su *has* to act this way because his specific qualities (molded by Woo-jin) demand it.[73]

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[72] A good example of this is also the scene of their first physical confrontation; Woo-jin knows that Dae-su will not kill him, since he he is too determined to find the truth to do so. By understanding this, he can control Dae-su.

[73] Jeon 2019 read *Oldboy* as a critique on the economic situation in Korea, stating: "Irregular labor, service work, and subsistence debt are all fruits from the same rotting tree. Against such violent aggressions, however sublimated, the only realizable desire is the modest hope for survival. Revenge is taken not against the aggressor but against someone else further down in the spiral of vicious circulation"(71). See Boman 2020 for an analysis of *Oldboy* as an expression of *han*, which Boman describes as follows: "In the most basic sense, it is understood as rancor or grief, which is a consequence of a persistent injustice due to asymmetric power relations or an inability to take proper means to solve the suffering"(919-920).

That there is a striking similarity between this cutting of the tongue in *Oldboy* and the self-blinding in *Oedipus Rex* is apparent also without the analysis I just offered. What exactly this similarity entails and how it is given shape by the authors, then, is what I have tried to show here. We have seen how in both stories, this self-mutilation functions as a result of the *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis*; because of what Oedipus and Oh Dae-su now finally understand, they feel the need to respond in this way. We have also seen that in both cases, this decision is made knowingly and willingly; Oedipus makes a decision that was not fated by the gods, and Dae-su action is no longer unknowingly directed by Woo-jin. In that sense, this decision of self-mutilation seems to be a decision made in freedom. However, we have seen how this is not entirely the case. In different ways in both works, we have found how this self-mutilation *is* necessary. In *Oedipus Rex*, allusions and dramatic irony concerning the self-blinding and thematization of blindness versus seeing make that the actual self-blinding has been highly anticipated and so, necessary on the level of story. In *Oldboy* we see a kind of meta-play: Woo-jin is able to have Dae-su completely at his mercy, since he has shaped his situation and character in such a way that, according to Aristotelian principles, Dae-su *has to* act this way, cutting his tongue as a sign of complete supplication.

5 Conclusion

In the last two chapters, we have analyzed the role of necessity in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Park Chan-wook's *Oldboy*. I believe this analysis has demonstrated how *Oldboy* is a very interesting modern imitation of *Oedipus Rex*, taking one of the core themes of the tragedy, necessity, and elaborating it in similar ways. We have already discussed some similarities and differences between how these two works deal with necessity, but speaking more generally, we have seen how in both works there is a tension between freedom and necessity on the level of the fabula; in *Oedipus Rex*, we see a man who seems to make his own decisions but by doing that, fulfills the oracles that were given by Apollo. In *Oldboy,* the protagonist appears to be free (after a long imprisonment), but we find out that Woo-jin's control over him has never stopped. It is apparent that both protagonists believe to be free, but there is some higher power that seems to control them.[74] In the climax of the two works, then, we see an interesting reversal regarding this power; Oedipus makes a decision that was not fated by Apollo by stabbing out his eyes, and Dae-su acts of his own accord by cutting his tongue (although, of course, he does this to supplicate himself to Woo-jin).

On the level of story, so the way in which the events are communicated to the audience, we also find necessity as an important concept in both works. In the analyses in the last two chapters, we have seen how the Aristotelian concepts of necessity and probability are effectuated in the structuring of events and characterization. When we look at the structuring of events, we have seen that both works show a strong causal link between the events of the story; all events that occur naturally follow from previous events in such a way that a unity of action is reached. No event could be transposed, removed or added, or the whole story would fall apart. This meticulously follows the rules of Aristotle, but not only does this result in a story that depicts just the necessary things, it also results in a feeling of necessity. Like the ticking clocks in the title screen of *Oldboy*, this 'chain of events' feels like a raging river dragging you along.

An important difference between the two stories is that, although both are focalized through their protagonist (Oedipus and Oh Dae-su), the audience of *Oedipus Rex* is already aware of Oedipus' fate, while the audience of *Oldboy* is unaware of Oh Dae-su's. This makes that the mutilation in *Oldboy* comes more unexpected than in *Oedipus*, especially when one takes in account the strong use of dramatic irony and allusion to the self-blinding in *Oedipus Rex*. These references to the end of the tragedy make that the audience is reminded of the self-blinding that is to happen in the end and in this way, also making this self-blinding feel necessary; it is made so present in the minds of the audience, that this *has* to happen. In *Oldboy* this is not the case, no references (that can be understood when watching the movie for the first time) to later tongue-cutting are made. However, we, as an audience, are constantly given a feeling of inevitability; through the ticking clocks in the beginning of the film or the way in which we are increasingly confronted with the power of Woo-jin. This shows how the differing knowledge of the audience is played with in the two works, and how this play constitutes some type of necessity; in *Oedipus Rex* the allusion to self-blinding makes the act of it necessary, while in

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[74] This control is more strong and identifiable in *Oldboy*, where Woo-jin even hypnotizes Dae-su to make him do certain things. It seems that the role of Apollo in *Oedipus Rex* is given a face and a motive in *Oldboy*, in the character Woo-jin, and so in this film, the higher power against which the protagonist tries to fight, really becomes an antagonist. This leaves the question *why* Woo-jin is given this role here. This is, I believe, a great question for further research, although others have already given their thought to it. As I mentioned in n.72, Jeon 2019 and Boman 2020 give interesting arguments concerning this question.

Oldboy, a feeling of necessity is given by indicating a higher power that the audience not yet understands.[75]

When it comes to characterization, we have seen a strong and consequent set of qualities in both Oedipus and Oh Dae-su;[76] Oedipus is determined, morally sound, authoritative and a logical thinker, Dae-su is determined, vengeful and in love with Mi-do. These character traits have remained the same throughout the two passages we discussed since their actions and words in both passages manifest these specific traits. So, on a story level, these characters both follow the Aristotelian rules.[77] With this type of characterization, then, we have found that some type of necessity is effectuated, because even though on the level of the fabula, the characters could respond to situations in several ways, on a story level they cannot: they are confined to their character traits that the author has to demonstrate to the audience time and again. This became in clear in Oedipus' self-blinding, which was, according to his thinking as explained in his speech, the only possible reaction to what had happened. In this sense, his decision to blind himself is necessary and probable. Dae-su's cutting of the tongue demonstrates a same kind of necessity, but on a meta-level: Woo-jin seems to take the role of the author, writing the character of Dae-su. He has molded his wishes and fears and so he knows exactly how Dae-su will respond to the situations Woo-jin puts him in.

I hope that this analysis has demonstrated the different types of necessity that are present on the level of fabula and story, and how the necessity we find in the characterization and structuring of events strengthens the necessity on the level of fabula. So we see how the Aristotelian concepts of necessity and probability are more than a set of rules for a good plot; in these works they add in specific ways to the theme of the works, communicating necessity or inevitability to the audience in various ways. This might also explain how this imitation of *Oedipus Rex* has often not been recognized as such: it incorporates its classical source in another way than we are used to, focusing more on a core problem and narratological techniques than on similarities in the storyline.[78] This is exactly why I believe that *Oldboy* is a great modern imitation of *Oedipus Rex*; it tells its own story, one that fits its modern audience, and uses its source material in an interesting way, taking notes from its story-telling techniques (and playing with those) to communicate the core problem of the work to the audience: necessity.

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[75] On another note I believe it to be a very nice way to give a modern audience an Oedipal experience without already knowing the end.

[76] Note again the similarity in their names.

[77] When looking at the specific traits, Oedipus is a better character according to Aristotle regarding his descent and his morality (Arist. *Poet.* 1453a7-17).

[78] Making *Oldboy* indeed more of an imitation of *Oedipus Rex* than a transformation, according to the terms of Genette 1982.

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