

Oldboy (2003) is an extraordinary Korean movie. In a [previous blog](#), I argued that Greek tragedy had a generic influence on certain East Asian forms of art, and I mentioned incest and family ancestry as two literary motifs that were carried over from Greek into East Asia. In this blog, I propose to analyse several other motifs in Oldboy (2003) that are very reminiscent of Greek tragedy, namely divine vengeance and anthropomorphic characterisation.

Oldboy (2003) is part of a trilogy that deals with vengeance (the other two being Sympathy for Mr Vengeance (2000) and Sympathy for Lady Vengeance (2005)). In this movie, we see the main character, Oh Dae-su, seeking vengeance for his unexplained imprisonment, and in the process he meets this young girl called Mido and goes head-to-head with this powerful guy called Lee Woo-jin, who is enacting vengeance on Oh Dae-su for something he did a long time ago. The climactic scene occurs when Oh Dae-su confronts Lee Woo-jin in his compound on a lofty floor. There he learns of his fate and realises what he has done, and thereby receives his punishment (see the blog mentioned above for the parallels with Greek tragedy in this particular scene). In the course of the movie, he also discovers the reason why Lee Woo-jin decided to punish him, namely an incident when they were still at school where Oh Dae-su discovered that Lee Woo-jin was committing incest with his sister (which subsequently led to her tragic death).

The roles played by Oh Dae-su and Lee Woo-jin are strikingly similar to those played by humans and gods in Greek tragedy. Humans suffer in the hands of the gods for their past hubris, just as Oh Dae-su does in the hands of Lee Woo-jin. Furthermore, the way Oh Dae-su discovers Lee Woo-jin's terrible secret looks very much like he is trespassing the boundaries between humans and gods, especially in the way he peeps through the window from a distance, which suggests some kind of enigmatic quality in Lee Woo-jin and his sister's encounter. Lee Woo-jin also strongly resembles Greek gods, the fact that he is ridiculously powerful and rich, like an almighty Greek god, and this is enhanced by his invisible and mystical presence throughout the movie (all the scenes in which he appears make him look like he has come out of nowhere); he lives high up in a magnificent building, coded, locked and debarred from other normal people, like a Greek god living up in the aether, separated from the lower, human world; he looks very young, like an ageless and immortal Greek god, in comparison to Oh Dae-su who looks relatively old when in fact they are supposed to be contemporaries at school; he commits incest with his sister, which is also a characteristic of Greek gods who often consort with one another (e.g. Zeus/Hera, who are husband/wife while being brother/sister at the same time); he takes vengeance on a human for offending him and trespassing the boundaries between men and gods,

which is also reminiscent of Greek gods who are fully anthropomorphic and display all human emotions as well as a massive ego, and they often punish humans for their hubristic behaviour. The confrontational scene is therefore very much like a confrontation between a human and a god in the divine realm, and their respective demise underlies the tragic feeling which permeates the entire movie. Not only then do the storyline and theme of vengeance resemble Greek tragedy, but the characters themselves also show many characteristics of the characters in Greek tragedy and anthropomorphic religion. I should also mention two other characters who bear resemblance to some famous characters in Greek tragedy: the woman who hypnotises Oh Dae-su and Mido and causes them to fall in love (cf Aphrodite, who is a powerful goddess who symbolises love and whose power is to make people fall in love), and of course Mido, the female protagonist, who throughout the movie is portrayed as a strong yet innocent young girl and reunites with Oh Dae-su in the end (cf Antigone, the daughter of one of the most famous Greek characters of all time, Oedipus, and is also famed for being strong-willed; see my blog referenced above for more parallels between Oh Dae-su/Mido and Oedipus/Antigone). The characters who make up this movie seem to have clear antecedents in Greek tragedy, which makes *Oldboy* (2003) a marvel to behold. Greek tragedy set in East Asia. Magnificent.