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Broken Chains, Open Doors, and Mad Women: Prison Escape Narratives in Euripides' Bacchae and Acts of the Apostles

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Megan Wines
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Narrative Parallels Between *Bacchae* and Acts 12:

(1) introduction of a new cult

- Acts: The establishment of proto-Christianity through bringing people to be believers in Jesus and followers of the Way serves as the driving action of the book as whole

-*Bacchae*: Told by Dionysus in the opening monologue that he has come to establish his rites in Thebes, and to avenge the lies told about his mother by her own sisters about his parentage by forcing them into a crazed worship of him

(2) the leader of the cult is imprisoned

- Acts: For the second time in the book, Peter finds himself arrested, and this time is under heavy guard (four squads of soldiers, and is bound between two of them), making any hope for escape seemingly impossible

-*Bacchae*: the jailing of Dionysus himself, disguised as the “Stranger,” a figure understood by his followers and Pentheus to be a mortal leader of the Bacchic (Dionysian) cult

(2.5) a group of faithful petition their deity for release of the prisoner

(3) miraculous escape orchestrated by the divine agent

- Acts: an “angel of the Lord” appears to Peter, and the chains fall from Peter’s wrists and the prison gates open automatically before them

-*Bacchae*: there are two relevant escapes in *Bacchae*, that of the bacchantes in 443-450 which features similar self-loosening chains and automatically opening doors, but also that of Dionysus himself in 613-641 where he simply frees himself from Pentheus’ prison.

(3.5) a “mad woman” receives the newly escaped prisoner

(4) the death of the tyrant/opposing force

- Acts: King Herod (who was responsible for throwing Peter in jail) is struck down by an “angel of the Lord,” via a gruesome death of being eaten by worms

-*Bacchae*: Pentheus is murdered and dismembered by the Theban woman driven mad by Dionysus, the leader of whom is his mother, Agave.

(5) the establishment of the new cult. (*neither narrative directly depicts this, but relies on audience knowledge*)

- Acts: The audiences of Acts would know that these actions and communities grew into what we now know as Christianity

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- *Bacchae*: *Bacchae* would have been presented at a festival dedicated to Dionysus, and the audience would have known of the established nature of the cult in society,

Quote 1:

Therefore, I have goaded them from the house **in frenzy**, and they dwell in the mountains, out of their wits; and I have compelled them to wear the outfit of my mysteries. And all the female offspring of Thebes, as many as are women, I have driven **maddened** from the house, and they, mingled with the daughters of Kadmos, sit on roofless rocks beneath green pines. (*Bacchae*, lines 32-38)

Quote 2:

“Oh! Oh! Do you not see the fire, do you not perceive, about the sacred tomb of Semele, the flame that Zeus' thunderbolt left? Cast on the ground your trembling bodies, Maenads, cast them down, for our lord, Zeus' son, is coming against this palace, turning everything upside down. (*Bacchae*, lines 596-603)

Quote 3:

He will soon bind me, the hand-maid of Bromius, in chains, and he already holds my fellow-reveler within the house, hidden in a dark prison. Do you see this, O Dionysus, son of Zeus, your priests in the dangers of restraint? Come, lord, down from Olympus, brandishing your golden thyrsos, and restrain the insolence of the blood-thirsty man. (*Bacchae* lines 545-555)

Quote 4:

Dionysus

Io! Hear my voice, hear it, Io Bacchae, Io Bacchae!

Chorus

Who is here, who? From what quarter did the voice of the Joyful one summon me?

Dionysus

Io! Io! I say again; it is I, the child of Zeus and Semele.

Chorus

Io! Io! Master, master! Come now to our company, Bromius.

(*Bacchae* lines 576-584)