Proceedings of ICIHCS 2026 Symposium: Alternate Narratives and Cross-Cultural Visions in a Globalized World
DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT38790

Maternal Justice and the Politics of Female Power: A Comparative Study of Medea and Isis in Greek and Egyptian Mythology

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Abstract. This article compares the motherhood and justice in Greek and Egyptian mythology through Medea and Isis. This article believes that these two characters are representation of maternal justice, which is an emotional, personal and female-centered form of justice rooted in the "power of a great mother". However, they practice this kind of justice in the opposite way. Medea is a model of destructive motherhood. Medea, who never have been recognize by the Corinth society apply destructive motherhood to kill her sons, destroy her link to the patriarchy society, and leave the city. Isis, practice the restorative motherhood to assist her son Horus on his fight of restoring the legit Egyptian kingship. Her magical power and identity as a goddess is intertwined in the political system of Egypt. However, both women's maternal nature are not recognized by the civilizations, the patriarchy societies find their own approach to either exile or contain their power.

Keywords: Medea, Isis, maternal justice, destructive motherhood, restorative motherhood

1. Introduction

Ancient Greek and Egyptian mythologies offer contrasting models of maternal power. In Greek myth, Medea, wife of Jason, murders the royal family of Corinth and her two sons before escaping in the dragon chariot of her grandfather, Helios. In Egyptian myth, Isis collects the dismembered body of her murdered husband Osiris, resurrects him as ruler of the underworld, and raises their son Horus to reclaim legitimate kingship. Both women possess extraordinary magical power and act as mothers. Yet they are remembered in sharply different ways: Medea as a cruel and heartless mother, and Isis as a respected divine mother, savior of legitimate kingship, and archetype for women.

This paper asks how and why two powerful mothers from ancient mythologies produce such divergent social and political outcomes. It argues that both Medea and Isis enact maternal justice, but in two distinct modes: destructive motherhood and restorative motherhood. The former weaponizes maternal power against patriarchal order; the latter aligns maternal power with existing political and divine structures. The comparison reveals that Greek and Egyptian cultures did not simply value motherhood differently; they developed different strategies for managing female power.

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2. Literature review

Scholarship on Medea has long emphasized her status as an outsider, her magical lineage, and her challenge to Greek patriarchy. Euripides and Seneca portray her as a woman whose fury is inseparable from her maternal identity [1, 2]. Kvistad argues that Euripides' representation of divinely sanctioned infanticide gives Medea an oppositional voice on human rights and gender difference [3]. Martorana reads Medea's murder as an act of abjection and self-recreation: the children must be expelled for Medea to become an autonomous subject [4]. Vasillopulos describes Medea as a reluctant goddess whose violence is not external monstrosity but a product of the patriarchal order that refuses to recognize her [5].

Studies of Isis, by contrast, emphasize her integration into Egyptian kingship. Frankfort shows that the pharaoh's legitimacy derived from his identification with Horus, the son of Isis [6]. Bommas examines Isis's performative speech and her public claims to civilizational agency [7]. Diodorus Siculus attributes Egyptian women's legal rights to Isis's example [8]. This paper builds on these studies but places Medea and Isis within a single analytical framework of maternal justice.

3. Theoretical framework: maternal justice and maternal power

The form of justice exercised by mothers through their own power and motherhood, in response to threats against their social identity or their children, is called maternal justice. According to Giancola's theory of justice evolution, justice began in antiquity as the "living force of the Great Mother," an emotional, personal, and female-centered mode of justice. It later evolved into philosophical concepts and, finally, written law [9]. Maternal justice originates in this first stage and therefore retains its emotional, personal, and female-centered traits.

Medea and Isis both enact maternal justice, but they do so through different methods and motivations, producing different social and political outcomes. Every power asset has two possible uses: destruction and protection. Maternal power can accordingly be divided into destructive motherhood and restorative motherhood. Destructive motherhood weaponizes maternal power against patriarchal order through the destruction of children and the mother-child relationship. Restorative motherhood preserves, restores, and nurtures life, integrating maternal power into social, political, and divine structures.

4. Nature of motherhood: destructive and restorative modes

4.1. Medea and destructive motherhood

Medea is a representative of destructive motherhood. Her maternal identity is weaponized against patriarchal power and the political system of Corinth. Her infanticide is not a moment of madness; it is a deliberate and calculated act with political intentions. She arrives in Corinth as Jason's wife and the mother of his sons, and this maternal identity becomes her basis for social recognition. Corinthian society connects her to Jason's reproductive power as a male citizen and thus to a share of political standing in the polis. Yet this standing does not protect her when Jason decides to abandon her for a politically advantageous marriage to the local princess. No civic order intervenes on her behalf. Medea is forced to enact her own maternal justice.

By killing her sons, she destroys the very source of her socio-political recognition in Corinth and asserts autonomy through annihilation rather than nurture. As she declares in Euripides' Medea, "I will kill my children; there is nobody that will deprive me of them" [1]. This is not merely a lament;

DOI: 10.54254/2753-7064/2026.HT38790

it is a claim of ownership and determining power over her children's lives. The children, as symbols of Jason's patriarchal lineage and inheritance system, become the tools through which Medea executes maternal justice for herself. Their death signals the moment when Medea forfeits the traditional expectation of a mother in Corinthian society and sacrifices the mother-son relationship.

Medea is fully aware of the outcome. She says in Euripides' play: "I know indeed what evil I intend to do, / But stronger than all my afterthoughts is my fury, / Fury that brings upon mortals the greatest evils" [1]. Her "irrational" fury is the emotional expression of the maternal justice that the polis refuses to deliver. In Seneca's version, the relationship between motherhood and Medea's identity is rendered explicitly. Seneca portrays Medea's revenge as a distorted creative process, with the language of childbirth imposed on the language of vengeance. Medea announces early in the play: "Now it is born, my vengeance is delivered: / I mothered it" [2]. She describes her rising desire for vengeance as a procedure of childbirth, suggesting that her revenge is raised and nurtured by her own power and rooted in her body. At this moment, Medea's two sides—the loving mother and the blood-thirsty witch—confront each other, foreshadowing the infanticide. After killing her children, she declares: "Now I am Medea" [2]. The logic of abjection is present: Medea must expel her children, a part of herself tied to Jason and Corinth's patriarchal order, to reclaim her identity as an autonomous subject [4]. Her murder is not merely vengeance but self-recreation. She experiences a spiritual rebirth by freeing herself from the role of mother.

Medea has often been recognized as an archetype of the Terrible Mother, a figure proposed by Carl Jung as the negative dark side of the mother. The figure carries male anxiety about women's capacity for ferocious and violent acts. Yet what makes Medea particularly dangerous to Corinth's male-dominated order is that she is not a monster from the outset. As Vasillopulos describes, "No Grendel's Dam, she had semidivine status, became a devoted wife and mother, and lived as a human" before she turned into the witch she was meant to be [5]. Medea's transformation from devoted mother to child-killer is precisely what makes her threatening: it shows that the capacity for uncontrollable violence resides not in an external monster but within maternal nature itself. Medea does not become a terrible monster because she is inherently evil. She becomes one because the patriarchal order refuses to recognize her and leaves her no other path to justice. The Terrible Mother archetype, in this reading, results not from Medea's nature but from a society that cannot contain or constrain her power. In other words, the patriarchal ideals embedded in Corinthian society oppress Medea, force her to become the "terrible mother," and transform her into a cruel yet powerful goddess figure.

4.2. Isis and restorative motherhood

Isis presents the opposite mode. She is referred to in temple dedications as "Great Isis, mother of the God." This title is significant: Isis is not merely the mother of a god in mythology but also the protector of the living ruler. Her motherhood is not a private, domestic relationship but a public and political protection. Every pharaoh, in claiming to be the living Horus, implicitly claims the protection and legitimacy of Isis. As Frankfort demonstrates, Egyptian kingship was fundamentally different from its Mesopotamian counterpart. The king was understood as a divine being, and the pharaoh's legitimacy derived from his identification with Horus, the son of Isis [6]. This made Isis part of the theological foundation of kingship itself.

Unlike Medea, whose maternal power remains personal and therefore threatening to Corinth, Isis's maternal power is institutionalized and codified in temple dedications and royal theology. Her motherhood is restorative: she collects Osiris's body parts, resurrects him, and protects Horus to

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ensure the continuation of legitimate kingship. Her power does not threaten Egyptian order; it sustains it.

The contrast between Medea and Isis is sharp. Medea's motherhood is destructive. She kills her children to reclaim her autonomy and to reassert her identity as a powerful demigoddess whom Corinth refuses to recognize. Isis's motherhood is restorative. She protects her son to restore legitimate kingship and to sustain an order that already venerates her. Medea's children are sacrificed for the mother's freedom, while Isis's son, Horus, is preserved for the state and legitimate kingship. This foundational difference contributes to the divergent ends of the two stories: Medea is exiled, and Isis is enthroned.

5. Relations to society

Medea's relationship to Corinthian society is defined by her status as an outsider. In Euripides' Athens, the citizenship law proposed by Pericles in 451/450 BCE restricted citizenship to those born of two Athenian parents. Foreign women, referred to as barbarians in Greek terms, could not be citizens in Corinth. Medea articulates this precarious position: "But I am destitute, without a polis, and so treated with hubris by my husband. I have been brought a captive from a foreign shore, and have no mother, brother, or relation in whom to find a new haven of refuge from this calamity" [1]. She is apolis, politically isolated from Corinth. Her social identity in Corinth exists entirely through her marriage to Jason and her role as the mother of his sons. She has no independent standing or political voice. When Jason discards Medea and tries to climb the political ladder by marrying the princess, he does not merely end a marriage; he threatens her social recognition. This structural exclusion is the precondition for her violent response.

Medea is both a victim and a critic. She delivers one of the most powerful indictments of women's condition in Greek tragedy: "Of all the creatures that have life and reason, we women are the most miserable of specimens!" [1]. Medea speaks in a systematic critical voice rather than concentrating only on personal issues; she is aware of the socio-political situation of women. She frames her individual suffering within the larger structure of female subordination normalized in Corinthian society. She speaks not only for herself but for all women who are bought, exchanged, and discarded by men. This speech is a manifestation of Medea's power: she names the injustice that the polis refuses to acknowledge.

Isis's relationship to Egyptian society is the opposite. Her power is institutionalized under the legitimate kingship of Egypt. Pharaohs claimed to derive their authority from Horus and recognized him as the divine ruler of Egypt; thus Isis became the divine mother and protector of all pharaohs who wished to rule by virtue and legitimization. The mother-son relationship is not the only thread that ties Isis to socio-political worship. As an individual goddess, by giving birth to Horus, the heir of the former legitimate Egyptian ruler Osiris, and by resurrecting Osiris, Isis contributes to the restoration of the Egyptian crown. Her political identity is significantly presented throughout her legend, beside her identity as a mother.

As the divine mother, the mourner of Osiris, and the savior of Egyptian kingship, Isis becomes the archetype for Egyptian women. Her figure remains impactful through Egyptian dynasties, but in a flexible and unstable way: it shifts according to political need. In Old Kingdom documents, she appears primarily as a mourner and supporter of the pharaoh. In the Middle Kingdom, she emerges more significantly as a mother and protector [10]. This transformation demonstrates a redefinition of Isis according to present political priorities. Her identity is flexible, and this flexibility becomes the origin of her usefulness to political ends.

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The integration of Isis into Egyptian political structure produced tangible benefits for Egyptian women. Diodorus Siculus attributes Egyptian women's legal rights directly to Isis's example: "You have made a power for the women equal to that of men" [8]. Isis is also identified with Ma'at, the goddess of cosmic justice in Egyptian culture. This divine connection made Isis's maternal justice not merely personal but universal and cosmic. Unlike Medea, whose destructive motherhood and maternal justice are blood-thirsty personal revenge, Isis's restorative motherhood and maternal justice restore universal order. The Egyptian political system does not need to exile Isis because her power is already aligned with the principles that sustain the system itself.

In short, ancient Greece and ancient Egypt adopted divergent solutions in response to the maternal justice power presented by the goddess. Ancient Greece took the exile approach in order to defend patriarchal society and political structure against the undefeatable divine maternal power of Medea. Ancient Egypt incorporated Isis's power into the legitimate political framework, enhancing patriarchal rule.

Drawing on Giancola's framework, the contrast is clear. Justice transformed from the "living force of the Great Mother" (stage one) to philosophical concept (stage two) to written law (stage three) [9]. Medea's maternal justice represents the tension between stages one and two. She embodies the personal, emotional, female-centered justice that the Greek polis has supposedly superseded. Her exile is not a punishment but a repudiation. Corinth cannot accommodate her because of the potential threat her maternal power poses to patriarchal society. Isis, by contrast, represents stage one being integrated into stage three. Her power is not opposed to Egyptian law and kingship; instead, it grounds them. Isis's soul is forever embedded in the Egyptian crown, as both mother of Horus and defender of legitimate kingship. In Egypt, the "living force of the Great Mother" is not eliminated but institutionalized. Isis's power is always recognized.

6. Manifestation of magical power

Medea's power is magical, personal, and derived from divine lineage. She is the priestess of Hecate and the granddaughter of Helios. As she declares in Euripides' play: "the mistress whom I honor most of all the gods, my chosen helper, she who dwells in the inner chamber of my house" [1]. Hecate is the goddess of magic, witchcraft, and the underworld. By honoring and worshiping Hecate, Medea absorbs the energy of magic from similar ideals. Medea's individual magical power is not granted by Corinth; it is inherent in her blood. She does not require approval for her actions. However, Medea's magic is fully released only when she ceases to be anyone's wife or mother and becomes simply herself.

In Seneca's version, Medea's magical performance is highlighted. She sets the princess of Corinth's dress on fire through her magic and performs rituals associated with divine power [2]. As Battistella argues, Medea experiences a "joy of killing" and actively embraces her divine power, elevating herself to demigod status through the "sacrifice" of her children [11]. Her maternal justice operates entirely outside the legal framework of Corinth. Medea destroys the patriarchal lineage and inheritance system built around her family with Jason through infanticide, but she also forfeits her social recognition in Corinth as a mother. Her escape from punishment leaves Corinthian society in a state of anxiety, since she is an example of displayed and uncontrollable female power. The Corinthian people cannot punish her because her power derives from a source beyond their jurisdiction.

In Euripides' play, the chorus calls Medea an "Erinys," the avenging spirits of Greek mythology [1]. Theoretically, however, Medea never acts like an Eriny. In Aeschylus' Eumenides, the Erinyes are persuaded by Athena to give up their autonomous power and accept a subordinate position

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within the Athenian polis [12]. They become the Eumenides, "the kindly ones." Their terrifying power is transformed into a tamed civic function. Medea refuses this bargain. As an individual, she does not seek integration or community containment. She practices her maternal justice on her own terms, displays her power openly, and then leaves Corinth—not because she is expelled, but because she has chosen to stop seeking recognition in a society filled with patriarchal ideals that oppress women. She is the untamed Erinys, the avenging spirit who will never stop pursuing her own justice.

There is a profound irony in Medea's ultimate fate. After destroying Jason's political ambitions by murdering his potential new wife, her father, and his male heirs, Medea escapes to Athens and marries King Aegeus, joining the royal family Jason had sought to enter. She does exactly what Jason planned to do: climb the political ladder through marriage to royalty. This irony suggests that Medea's empowerment, for all its radical force, still does not escape the logic of patriarchal politics. To the very end of her revenge, Medea's success is still demonstrated from a classical masculine perspective. She does not create a new model of female power. She seizes the existing model of male power and wields it more effectively than any man. She becomes, in effect, more manly than Jason: more ruthless, more ambitious, and more politically calculating. Most importantly, the magical empowerment she once used to help Jason fulfill his Golden Fleece mission is now used to assert her own justice. Her empowerment is real, but it is framed within the patriarchal terms it supposedly overturns. The tragedy of Medea, from this perspective, is not solely the infanticide; it also lies in the fact that Medea's success peaks when she wields male power and reaches the social status of a man. The ambition of an ordinary human warrior, Jason, becomes the ultimate milestone of successful revenge for Medea, a powerful witch.

Isis's power manifests differently. Bommas calls her "the most outspoken goddess in ancient Egypt" [7]. Her public speech acts demonstrate her acceptance and integration into the Egyptian political and religious system. In the Isis Aretalogy, she declares: "I am Isis, mistress of every land, and I was taught by Hermes and with Hermes I devised letters, both the sacred hieroglyphs and the demotic, that all things might not be written with the same letters" [7]. Isis presents her claim of civilizational agency publicly. She does not wait to be recognized; she announces her own power. Yet this announcement is made within a religious tradition that already accepts her authority. Bommas also suggests that Isis's words are highly performative. As she claims in the Metternich Stela: "I am Isis, the goddess, the owner of magic, who performs magic with powerful speech and with chosen words" [7]. She performs her magic through speech and reinforces her ideas with it. She speaks, but her speech is the speech of the system itself.

Medea's power is exercised through magic, command, and domination of emotions. She forces the world to bend to her will through supernatural means while defending her own justice. Isis's power is exercised through authoritative speech and public declaration; when she speaks, speech shapes reality. Medea's power is personal and external to Corinth; Isis's power is institutional and internal to Egyptian kingship. One is expressed through destruction, and the other is recognized through integration. One demands obedience; the other invites collaboration. Medea utilizes her ability like a witch, while Isis presents herself as a goddess.

7. Conclusion

The contrasting depictions of Medea and Isis reveal that Greek society depicted maternal power as a destructive threat to patriarchal order, while Egyptian society integrated it into the political order that supported legitimate kingship through divine legitimation and recognition. However, Medea is always free. Her identity is untamed, and she is the one who defines her own ability. Isis's figure, by contrast, follows the needs of Egyptian politics.

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This comparison demonstrates that the treatment of female power in mythology is not universal but differs between cultural civilizations. It reflects each civilization's deeper anxieties and strategies for maintaining civic and political order. The stories of the goddesses and their interaction with political systems and society are never merely mythologies; they reflect the attitudes of patriarchal societies toward female power.

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