

The aim of this paper is to demonstrate how the slaying of Aegisthus in vase-painting and tragedy served as a mythical vehicle for expressing tensions between the socio-political postures of Athenian hoplite farmers and the traditional aristocratic ethos of the wealthy elite in the 5th century. In both media, the popular negative image of Hipparchus serves as the model for Aegisthus' character, while Orestes and Pylades assume the guise of Harmodius and Aristogeiton. I argue that both struggles are imagined in terms of class conflict. Vase painters use musical imagery to highlight the differences between a perceived aristocratic Aegisthus and a democratic Orestes, while Euripides models the *Elektra* on the same historical and mythical tradition exemplified by the vases, using character to express class variance. Anti-Peistratid sentiments and a parallel between Harmodios/Aristogeiton and Orestes/Pylades have long been recognized in a series of well known vases appearing around 470 showing Orestes slaying a seated Aegisthus (Prag 1985, 92f; Neer 2002, 178). Certain peculiarities of these images, including the barbitos clutched by Aegisthus as well as Orestes' hoplite armor, are usually explained in terms of general oppositions, such as masculine and feminine or bravery verses cowardice (Snyder, *AJA* 1976; Bernal 1997; McNiven 2000). However, I suggest that these attributes alluded more specifically to Hipparchus as aristocratic *philomousos* and to the tyrannicides as citizen avengers of the middle class. In Athenian popular imagination, the figure of Hipparchus became the archetypal enemy of the *demos*, the aristocratic Other who was defined in opposition to the middling citizen. Hipparchus was characterized as rich, hubristic, and overly fond of both music and boys (*Arist.Ath.*18.1). The barbitos held by Aegisthus would have evoked images of the tyrant Hipparchus and his swish lifestyle. In 5th century art and poetry the barbitos is associated specifically with aristocratic symposia and pederasty (Maas and Snyder 1989, 113f.). The oligarchic subtext of this instrument is further indicated by Critias (fr.3.4), one of the Thirty, who praises Anacreon, Hipparchus' court poet, as *philobarbitos*. These images would not have been lost on the average citizen, who, like Themistocles (*Plu.Them.*2), harbored rather negative views of elite musical education. In contrast, Orestes is shown striding forward in full hoplite armor, the panoply *par excellence* of the middle class citizen. Similarly, Aristogeiton, whose deed inspired the iconography of these vases, is described as a citizen of the middle sort (*mesos polit_s*), and it is precisely the hoplites (*tous hoplitas*) whom Hippias targets after the assassination of his brother (Thuc. 6.54, 58). This "middling" tradition about the tyrannicides, as opposed to the oligarchic response to it (Neer 2002, 170), lies behind the characterizations of Aegisthus and Orestes in both vase-painting and Euripides' *Elektra*. The significance of class conflict in the plot of this tragedy has recently been noticed and briefly sketched by David Konstan in his pioneering article "The Classics and Class Conflict" (*Arethusa* 1994, 54). Adding to these initial observations, I argue that Euripides drew on the same tradition illustrated by vase painting, basing his plot and characters on the historical Athenian tyrannicide while casting the events amid a backdrop of broader class tensions. For example, the threat represented by Elektra is curtailed by her marriage to the farmer (37-42) echoing Thucydides' statement that Aristogeiton's standing also hindered his efforts in opposition of the tyranny (Thuc. 6.54). In addition, Elektra derides Aegisthus' wealth and beauty, drawing a sharp contrast between manly virtue and good looks, which she declares are good only for adorning choruses (938-951).