

Aeschylus



- The Life and Times of Aeschylus
- Aeschylus' Contributions to Greek Tragedy
- Overview of Myth: The House of Atreus
- Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*



Aeschylus



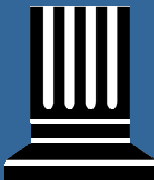
Life and Times

- after winning both the Persian Wars, the Athenians' spirits soared
- they threw themselves into the arts with unprecedented energy and confidence
- tragedy was among those arts, one which received much public attention



Aeschylus

Life and Times

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- the first tragedian whose work survives is **Aeschylus** (ca. 525 BCE - 456 BCE)
 - according to his tombstone, Aeschylus fought in the Persian Wars
 - but it does not mention his drama
 - according to him, then, his most important achievement in life was fighting for freedom, not writing plays

Aeschylus

Life and Times

- Aeschylus won the Dionysia for the first time in 484 BCE
- he produced his last known trilogy in 458 BCE: *Oresteia* (including *Agamemnon*)
- he wrote and produced over eighty plays during his life
- thus, he entered the Dionysia at least twenty times

Aeschylus

Contributions to Drama

- but only seven of his plays have survived
- most in school texts, cf. *Epic of Gilgamesh*
- nevertheless, we can see that he was the most important playwright of his day:
 - he won five or more victories at the Dionysia
 - later playwrights often referenced and imitated—and satirized!—his work
 - the audiences of the next generation enjoyed revivals of his drama

Aeschylus

Contributions to Drama

- Aeschylus introduced the second actor (*hypocrites*) to the stage
- thus, he was the inventor of dialogue in the conventional sense of the word, i.e. between actors (vs. actor and chorus)
- later, the principal actor came to be called the **protagonist** (“first contender”)

Aeschylus

Contributions to Drama

- Aeschylus focused on creating **language** that was effective and affecting on stage
- his poetry is lofty, ornate and complex
- indeed, it is some of the most difficult to understand but most beautiful Greek ever written, cf. Shakespeare
- at times, his imagery is so dense that it was rumored he wrote his plays drunk!

Aeschylus

The House of Atreus

- the story of the House of Atreus is the mythic cycle of **Argos**
- but Argos is not where Atreus' family came from originally

MAP 2-3 THE PELOPONNESUS Sparta's region, Laconia, was in the Peloponnesus. Nearby states were members of the Peloponnesian League under Sparta's leadership.



Aeschylus

The House of Atreus

Atreus' Family Tree

Tantalus

(Lydia)

Pelops

- the story begins with **Tantalus**, the king of Lydia (Asia Minor)
- Tantalus was a favorite of the gods
- when the gods came to dine with him, he wanted to serve something special
- he cut up and cooked his son **Pelops**

Aeschylus

The House of Atreus

Atreus' Family Tree

Tantalus

(Lydia)

Pelops

- in some versions of the myth, he wanted to test the gods' omniscience
- the gods mercifully restored Pelops to life and punished Tantalus in Hades
- he stands forever "tantalized" (thirsty and hungry) in a river by an orchard

Aeschylus

The House of Atreus

Atreus' Family Tree

Tantalus

(Lydia)

Pelops

Oenomaus

(Elis)

Hippodameia

+

- Pelops fled to **Elis** (NW Greece)
- the king of Elis was **Oenomaus** who had only one daughter **Hippodameia**
- Oenomaus raced her suitors in a chariot
- if the suitor won, he got Hippodameia
- if he lost, he was executed on the spot

Aeschylus

The House of Atreus

Atreus' Family Tree

Tantalus

(Lydia)

Pelops

Oenomaus

(Elis)

Hippodameia

+

- Pelops was one of those suitors
- he sought the help of Oenomaus' mechanic **Myrtilus** by offering him Hippodameia on her wedding night
- Myrtilus put "wax linchpins" in Oenomaus' chariot

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Atreus' Family Tree

Tantalus

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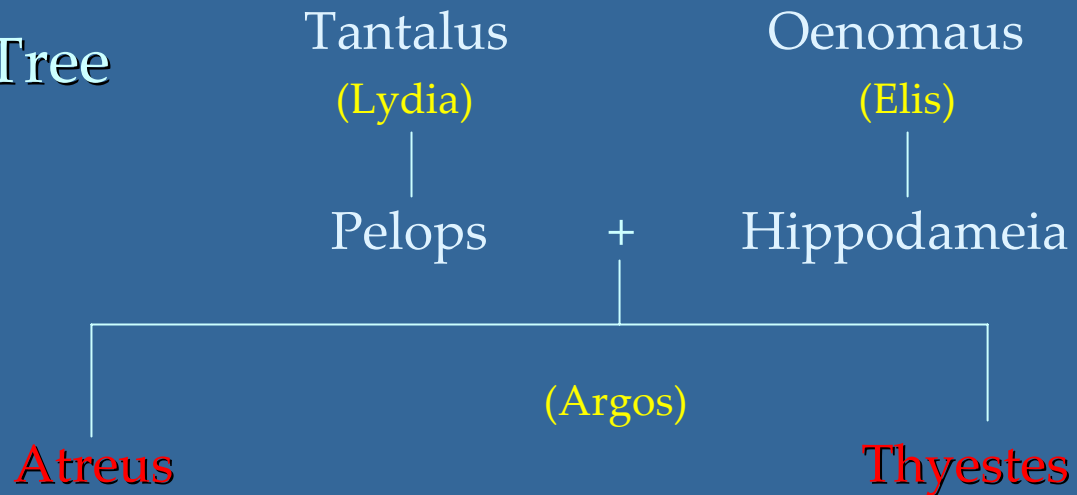
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- Oenomaus died during the race when the wheels fell off his chariot
- but before the wedding Pelops killed Myrtilus by kicking him off a cliff
- as he fell to his death, Myrtilus cursed Pelops and his whole family line

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The House of Atreus

Atreus' Family Tree

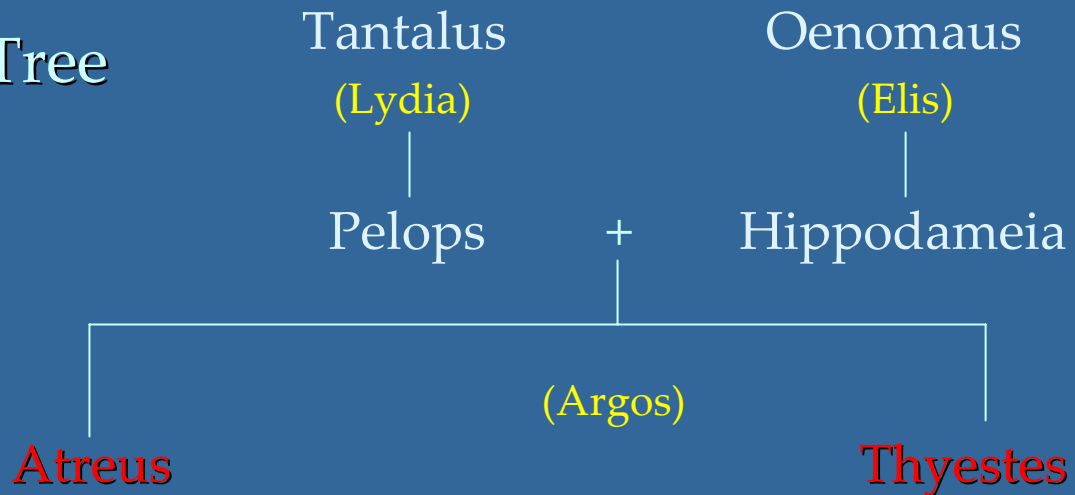


- Pelops conquered the **Peloponnese** ("Pelops' Island") and moved to Argos
- he and Hippodameia had two sons, **Atreus** and **Thyestes**

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The House of Atreus

Atreus' Family Tree

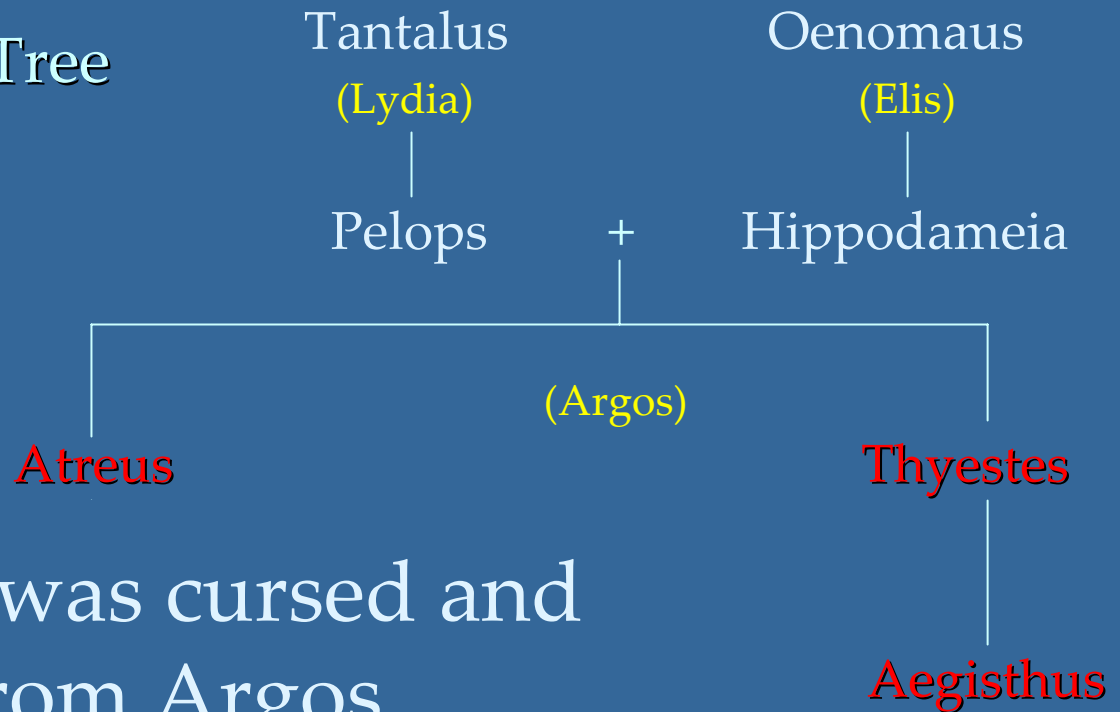


- when Atreus and Thyestes grew up, they fought over their father's throne
- ultimately, Atreus tricked Thyestes into eating his own children in public

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The House of Atreus

Atreus' Family Tree

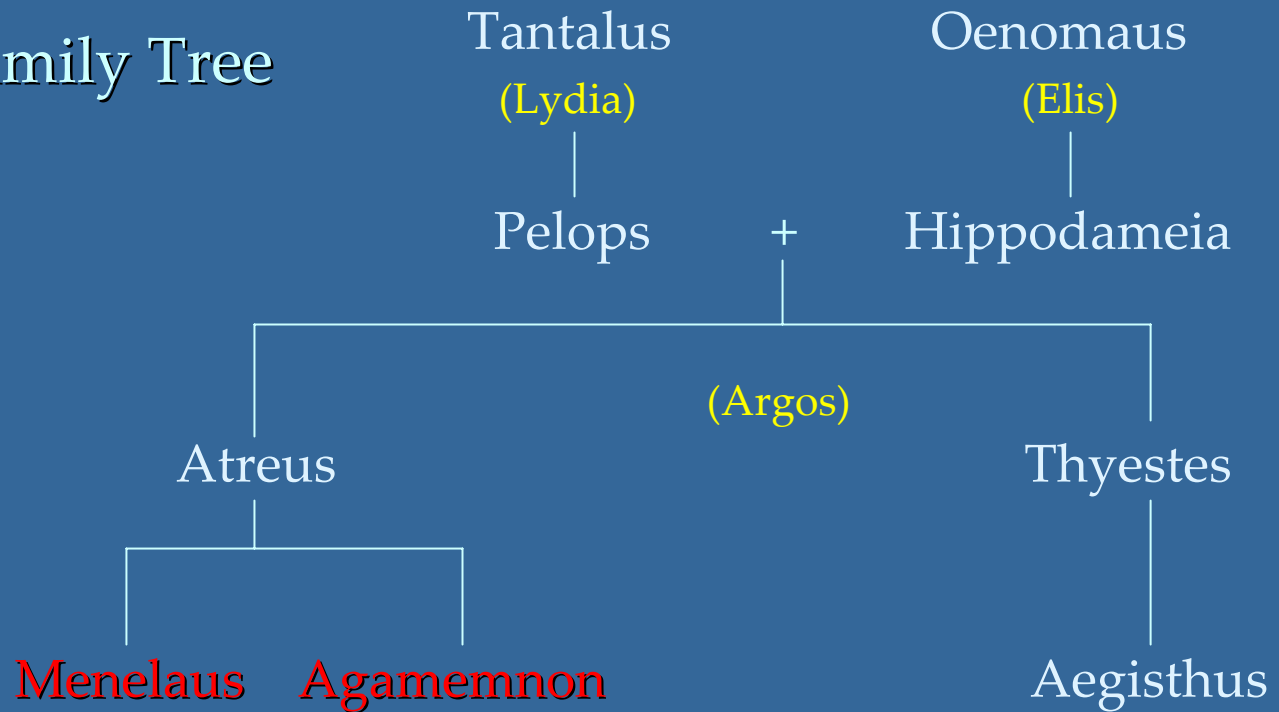


- Thyestes was cursed and evicted from Argos
- Thyestes' son **Aegisthus** was also condemned and banished

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The House of Atreus

Atreus' Family Tree

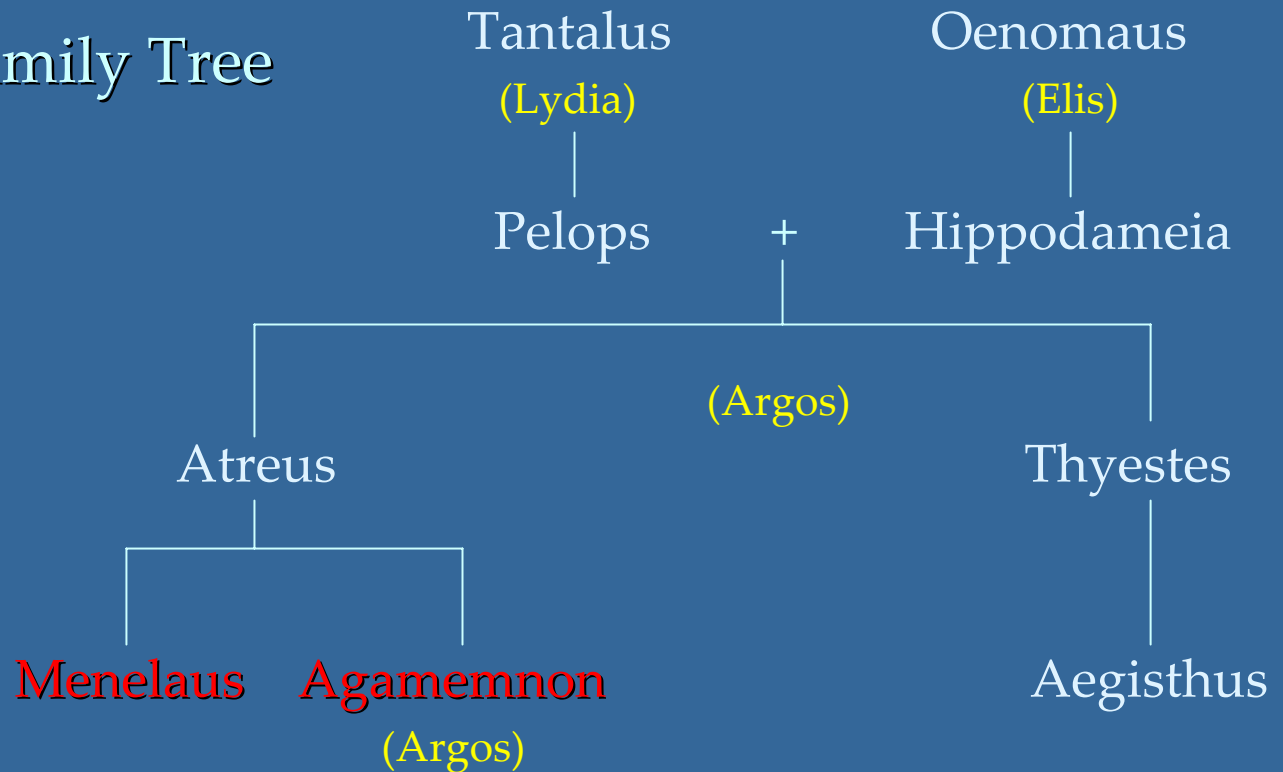


- Atreus' sons, **Agamemnon** and **Menelaus**, inherited his kingdom

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The House of Atreus

Atreus' Family Tree

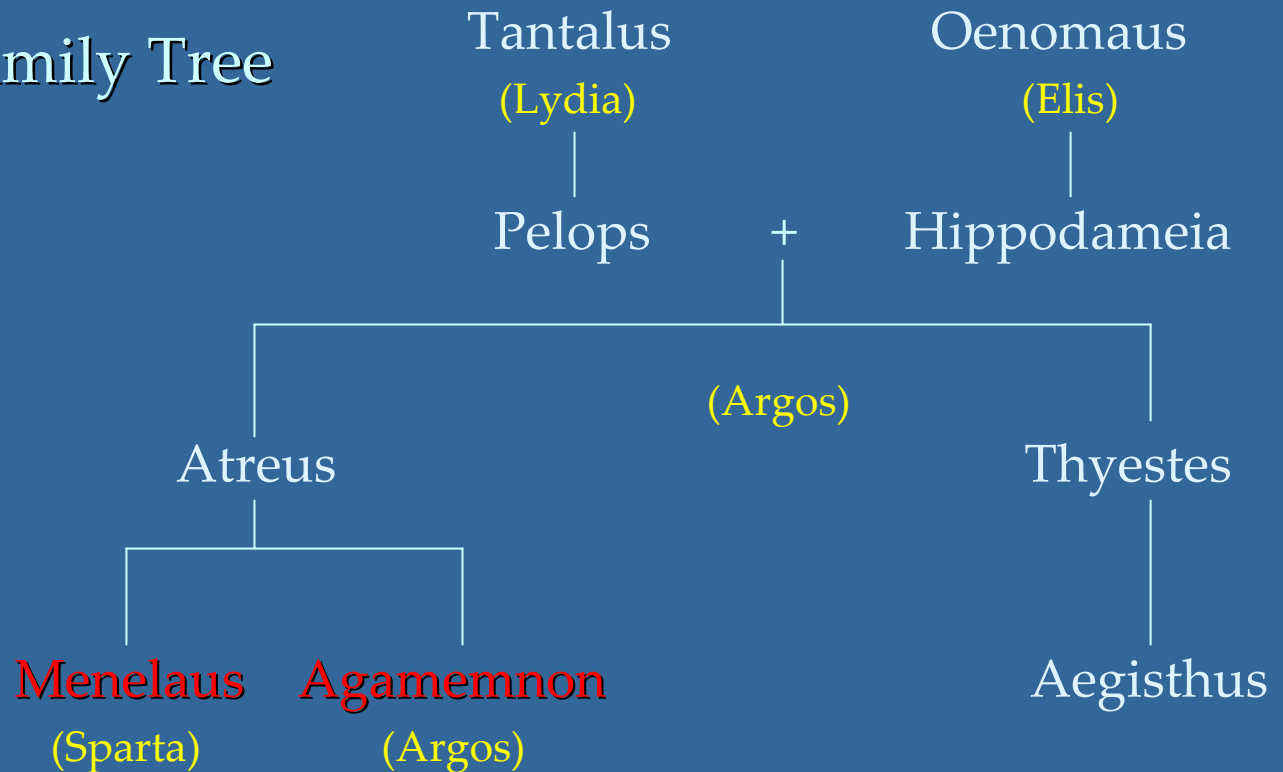


- Agamemnon chose to rule Argos

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Atreus' Family Tree

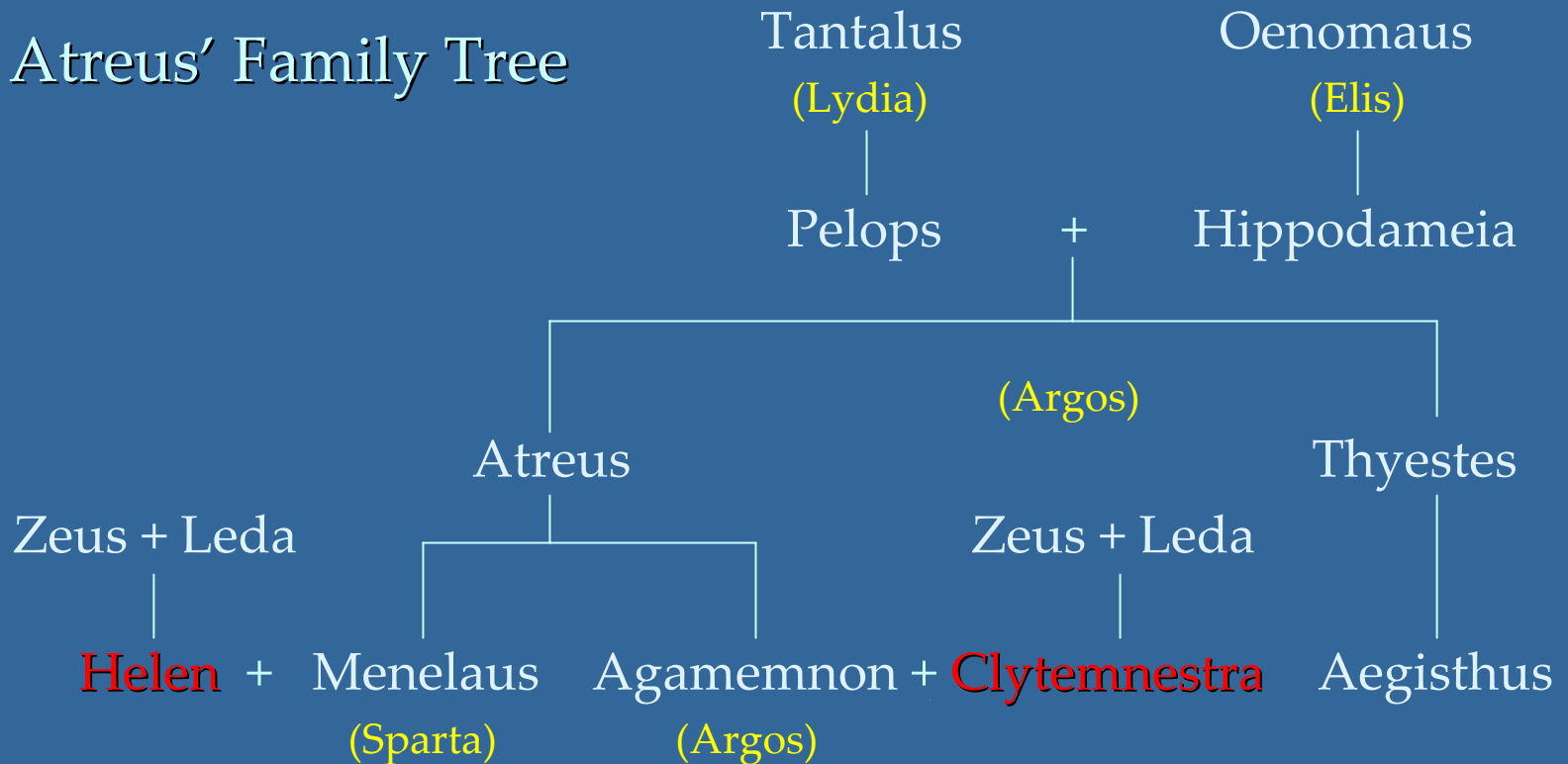


- Menelaus opted for Sparta

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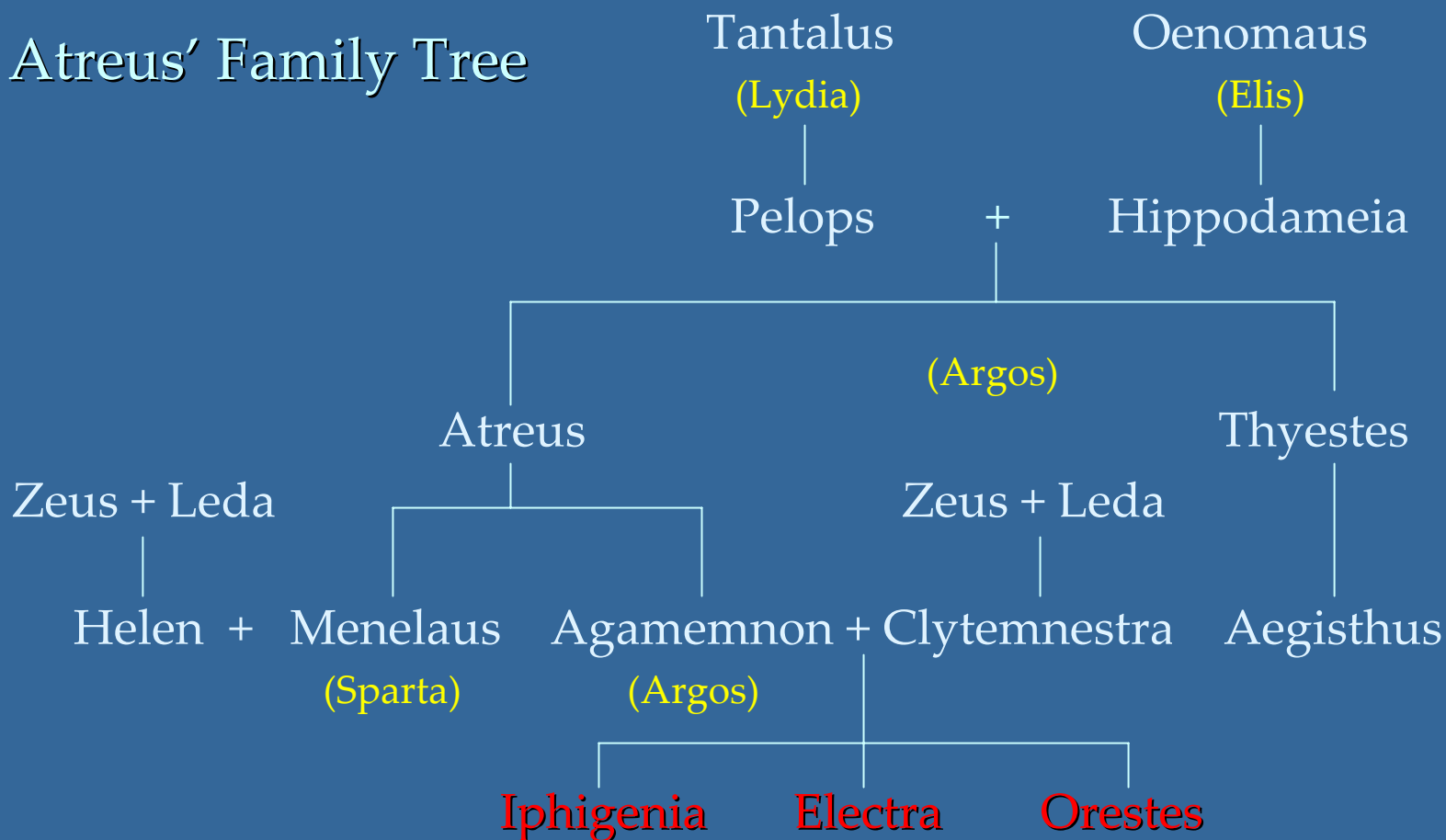
Atreus' Family Tree



- they married Helen and Clytemnestra

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The House of Atreus



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