

# Cast of Characters

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Homer's cast is large and the names can be unfamiliar — and they change spelling from one translation to another. Older English versions (Pope, Chapman, Butler) often use the Roman names of the gods, so Athena becomes Minerva, Poseidon becomes Neptune, and Odysseus himself becomes Ulysses. The list below groups the principal figures by where they belong in the story, with alternate spellings noted. Keep it within reach for the first few books; the names settle quickly once the world comes into focus.

## The House of Odysseus

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**Odysseus** *oh-DISS-yoos* · *Lat. Ulysses; also Ulixes*

The hero. King of Ithaca, celebrated for cunning and endurance, struggling for ten years to return home after the Trojan War. Older translations frequently call him Ulysses.

**Penelope** *puh-NEL-oh-pee*

Odysseus's wife. Besieged for years by suitors who assume Odysseus is dead, she holds them off through patience and her own cleverness, famously by unweaving each night the shroud she weaves by day.

**Telemachus** *tuh-LEM-uh-kus*

The son of Odysseus and Penelope. The poem opens with him as a passive youth and follows his growth into a young man capable of standing beside his father.

**Laertes** *lay-UR-teez*

Odysseus's aged father, living in retreat on a farm in Ithaca, worn down by grief. He rallies on his son's return and strikes a decisive blow in the final reckoning.

**Anticleia** *an-tih-KLY-uh*

Odysseus's mother, who died of grief in his absence. He encounters her shade in the land of the dead.

**Argos** *AR-gos*

Odysseus's old hunting dog. Now neglected and infirm, he alone recognizes his master at once on his return — one of the poem's most quietly affecting moments.

## The Loyal Household

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**Eumaeus** *yoo-MEE-us*

The faithful swineherd who shelters and feeds the disguised Odysseus without knowing who he is, embodying the poem's ideal of hospitality. He helps in the final fight.

**Eurycleia** *yoo-rih-KLY-uh* · *also Euryclea*

The aged, devoted nurse who raised both Odysseus and Telemachus. She recognizes the returned Odysseus by an old scar on his leg and keeps his secret.

**Philoetius** *fih-LEE-shus*

The loyal cowherd who, with Eumaeus, stands by Odysseus against the suitors.

**Mentor** *MEN-tor*

An old friend of Odysseus in Ithaca. Athena repeatedly takes his form to guide Telemachus — the source of the modern word “mentor.”

## The Suitors and the Disloyal

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### The Suitors

The crowd of young noblemen occupying Odysseus's house, courting Penelope and consuming his wealth while abusing the code of hospitality. Their fate is the engine of the poem's second half.

**Antinous** *an-TIN-oh-us*

The most arrogant and aggressive of the suitors, ringleader of the plot to kill Telemachus. He is never shown sympathetically and is the first to die.

**Eurymachus** *yoo-RIM-uh-kus*

The other leading suitor — a smooth, deceitful talker who flatters in public while scheming in private.

**Amphinomus** *am-FIN-oh-mus*

The one comparatively decent suitor, who occasionally speaks for restraint but shares the others' fate.

**Melanthius** *muh-LAN-thee-us*

The treacherous goatherd who taunts the disguised Odysseus and arms the suitors; he meets a grisly end.

**Melantho** *muh-LAN-tho*

An insolent palace maidservant, sister of Melanthius, who abuses the disguised Odysseus and is involved with Eurymachus.

**Eupeithes** *yoo-PY-theez*

Father of Antinous, who leads the suitors' kin in seeking revenge after the slaughter.

## The Gods

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**Athena** *uh-THEE-nuh* · *Lat. Minerva; also Pallas Athene*

Goddess of wisdom and craft, Odysseus's tireless divine champion and the guiding intelligence behind the plot. Often called Minerva or Pallas in older versions.

**Poseidon** *poh-SY-dun* · *Lat. Neptune*

God of the sea and Odysseus's chief divine enemy, who prolongs his wanderings to avenge the blinding of his son Polyphemus.

**Zeus** *ZOOSS* · *Lat. Jove or Jupiter*

King of the gods, who arbitrates their disputes and ultimately sanctions Odysseus's return and the peace that ends the poem.

**Hermes** *HUR-meez* · *Lat. Mercury*

The messenger god, who carries the gods' commands — notably the order that Calypso release Odysseus — and aids the hero against Circe.

**Helios** *HEE-lee-os* · *the Sun; also Hyperion*

The sun god, whose sacred cattle Odysseus's starving crew slaughter despite warnings, sealing their doom.

## The Wanderings

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### **Calypso** *kuh-LIP-so*

The nymph who holds Odysseus on her island of Ogygia for years, offering him immortality if he will stay. She releases him at Zeus's command.

### **Circe** *SUR-see · also Kirke*

The enchantress who turns Odysseus's men into swine, then — overcome — becomes his ally and advisor, sending him to consult the dead.

### **Polyphemus** *pol-ih-FEE-mus · the Cyclops*

The one-eyed giant, a son of Poseidon, who traps Odysseus and his men in his cave and devours several before Odysseus blinds him and escapes. The blinding earns Poseidon's lasting wrath.

### **The Sirens** *SY-renz*

Creatures whose irresistible song lures sailors to their deaths. Odysseus has his crew plug their ears and bind him to the mast so he alone may hear and survive.

### **Scylla and Charybdis** *SIL-uh / kuh-RIB-dis*

Twin sea perils guarding a narrow strait — a many-headed monster and a devouring whirlpool. To pass, Odysseus must sacrifice a few men to avoid losing all.

### **Tiresias** *ty-REE-see-us*

The blind prophet of Thebes whom Odysseus consults among the dead. He foretells the hero's troubled homecoming and warns against harming Helios's cattle.

### **The Lotus-Eaters**

A people whose flower induces blissful forgetfulness; Odysseus's men who taste it lose all desire to return home, and he must drag them back to the ships.

### **Aeolus** *EE-oh-lus*

Keeper of the winds, who gives Odysseus a bag containing all the contrary winds; his crew open it in sight of home, undoing their progress.

## The Phaeacians

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### **Alcinous** *al-SIN-oh-us*

The generous king of the Phaeacians, the seafaring people who host the shipwrecked Odysseus, hear the tale of his wanderings, and convey him home with rich gifts.

### **Arete** *uh-REE-tee*

Queen of the Phaeacians and wife of Alcinous, notably respected and influential at court.

### **Nausicaa** *naw-SIK-ay-uh*

The Phaeacian princess who discovers the bedraggled Odysseus washed ashore and, with poise beyond her years, brings him to her parents' palace.

## The Wider Greek World

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### **Nestor** *NESS-tor*

The aged, wise king of Pylos and a Trojan War veteran. Telemachus visits him seeking news of his father.

### **Menelaus** *men-uh-LAY-us*

King of Sparta, brother of Agamemnon, husband of Helen. He receives Telemachus and shares what he knows of Odysseus.

### **Helen** *HEL-en*

Wife of Menelaus, whose abduction sparked the Trojan War; now restored to Sparta, she appears as a gracious and complex hostess.

### **Agamemnon** *ag-uh-MEM-non*

Commander of the Greek forces at Troy, murdered by his wife and her lover on his return — a dark mirror to Odysseus's safe homecoming, invoked throughout as a warning.

### **Achilles** *uh-KIL-eez*

The greatest Greek warrior of the Trojan War, whom Odysseus meets among the dead; his famous lament for the emptiness of glory in death is a high point of Book 11.