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## Sultan Compares *House of Cards* Trickster to Odysseus

Feb. 10, 2015

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Is “Frank Underwood” a modern-day Odysseus? Illinois Wesleyan University Greek and Roman Studies Professor Nancy Sultan thinks the cunning, deceitful protagonist of the Netflix political drama *House of Cards* and the hubristic, mercurial Odysseus have much in common.

Sultan will present her research-in-progress on Feb. 24 at 4:30 p.m. at The Ames Library’s Beckman Auditorium. Sultan’s presentation is “Let Us Now Praise Wicked Men: Netflix Series *House of Cards* and the ‘Fifth Age’ of Television.”



Greek and Roman Studies Professor Nancy Sultan compares *House of Cards*’ protagonist (pictured) to the hubristic Odysseus – whom we admire but must publicly condemn.

Critically acclaimed *House of Cards* is the story of U.S. Congressman Frank Underwood (played by Kevin Spacey), who, when passed over for an appointment as Secretary of State, devises an elaborate scheme to gain a far greater position of power. The series follows Frank and his wife, Claire (played by Robin Wright), and their manipulation of power and people in doing bad things for the greater good. The series has been nominated for 31 Emmy Awards. Season three begins streaming Feb. 27.

A self-described “huge fan” of both the series and Spacey’s portrayal of Underwood, Sultan said she’d been thinking about *House of Cards*, *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad* and a host of other popular, critically celebrated programs that feature protagonists who break the mold of the hero as ‘good guy.’ These characters model the opposite of the ‘best tragic hero’ defined by Aristotle, Sultan said.

She noted these modern protagonists seem to go against the very grain of programs from the so-called “Golden Age” of television, when heroes fell into bad fortune because of mistakes, not because they were evil men.

“These new main characters are evil, they disrespect good people, they succeed through hubris, yet we are fascinated by them and we follow their every move,” said Sultan. “I started thinking about Frank Underwood and why we are drawn to him and the show (*House of Cards*). Frank models the opposite of the ideal Aristotelian hero, which is a man who falls from good to bad fortune not because he is evil, but because he makes mistakes. Frank is a murderer who succeeds through brazen hubris.”

Sultan will draw on several sources, ranging from the 8<sup>th</sup>-century Greek poet Hesiod to contemporary British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner. In her reception study, Sultan will argue that Frank Underwood represents an Odyssean trickster figure.

As a hero of the Trojan War, Odysseus is renowned for his cunning and his tactics. “Odysseus succeeds through cunning, but he is not a good guy,” said Sultan. “Everyone privately envies the Odyssean trickster figure because he’s climbed to the top. He’s successful, wealthy and powerful. Yet, publicly, we must condemn him, because he acts with hubris and becomes a threat to democracy.”

The Frank Underwood character invites similar feelings. “As viewers, we know Frank is not a good guy, we know we have to watch out for him because he’s tricky,” Sultan adds. “But in private we wonder, ‘how can we achieve what he has achieved?’ We envy what he has and what he has accomplished.”

Sultan’s presentation will feature clips from the series and will be followed by discussion. The event is free and open to the public.