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Classics Professor Compares *House of Cards* Trickster to Odysseus

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— The mythical Greek king Odysseus would recognize much of himself in the cunning, deceitful Frank Underwood, the lead character in the Emmy-nominated Netflix political drama *House of Cards*.

Illinois Wesleyan Greek and Roman Studies Professor Nancy Sultan is studying the critically acclaimed series, which is the story of Underwood (portrayed by Emmy nominee Kevin Spacey) and his wife, Claire (played by Emmy nominee Robin Wright), and their manipulation of people and politics in elaborate schemes to gain power.

Sultan finds it fascinating that *House of Cards*, along with other dramas such as *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos*, feature wicked men who disrespect the good and still succeed.

“The Odyssean trickster fascinates and delights us by being *polumêtis*, ‘a man of many schemes,’ but he also has the potential to become a tyrant so wicked so as to demand ritual sanctions,” said Sultan. “In Homer’s epics, Odysseus is praised as the *polumêtis* hero, whose clever plans help the Greeks conquer Troy; however, by the fifth century BC, dramatists were openly criticizing his personality and behavior in their depictions. The playwright Sophocles portrays Odysseus as ‘the kind of man the occasion demands;’ an individual who will do or say anything to get what he wants, no matter the cost. The Odyssean trickster-figure always lands on his feet, but at the expense of others.”

House of Cards works, in part, because it capitalizes on our secret envy of and admiration for such a versatile trickster, one who possesses cunning, allure, a spectacular command of rhetoric, and a deep understanding of human fallibility, she said. “All of these characteristics enable him to win it all, while the goody-goodies shake their heads in disbelief. In public, we condemn such conniving types, but in private, we wish we could be as successful.”

Like Odysseus, Frank Underwood is a master of persuasion, Sultan said. Odysseus tells lies – actually riddles – to test who is, and who is not loyal. Underwood does the same test allegiance to get what he wants. “The onus is on the audience to determine the veracity of his words,” Sultan said. And like Odysseus, Underwood’s nature is always to be on the lookout for some position of ambush, to win by deceit if necessary, she added.

The *House of Cards* audience is not blameless, either. “Just as Odysseus draws the good and honest Neoptolemus [son of the warrior Achilles] into his schemes in Sophocles’ tragedy *Philoctetes*, we, the audience of *House of Cards*, become criminals ourselves when we ride shotgun with Frank Underwood,” said Sultan. “As the Athenian orator Demosthenes says, ‘A wicked public figure only succeeds if the people support him; he is weak on his own.’ ”

Such figures can be vulnerable when public opinion changes. “The Greeks wrote that when a ‘man of many schemes’ becomes viewed as a hated man, a really dangerous scoundrel who subverts democracy in his desire to fashion the people in his own image, he must be punished,” she said. “They believed that such a man *will* be punished, either by man’s law or, failing that, by the divine.

“Even if we admire Underwood as a man of many schemes, we expect that justice will be served on him eventually,” she added. “In Season Three, Heather Dunbar, Underwood’s rival for the presidency, channels the Greeks when she states that ‘Frank Underwood is a dangerous man because power in the hands of those who lack honesty lacks a moral compass.’ She casts him as a liar who flouts the law.” Sultan argues that, as a social drama, “*House of Cards* will unite us all around the punishment of this hubristic politician. Until that happens, we look forward to Season Four and Underwood’s next clever scheme.”

Sultan presented a paper on her work at a 2014 *Film and History* Conference for a panel on classical antiquity and the “golden age” of television. She is working on a book chapter on the same topic.



Professor Nancy Sultan compares Kevin Spacey's Frank Underwood to an Odyssean trickster figure, who fascinates and delights us as "a man of many schemes."