

Let us now praise wicked men:
House of Cards in the "Fifth Generation" of Television

ABSTRACT

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In his myth of the five generations of mankind, the Archaic Greek poet Hesiod describes the first as 'golden'. This race of mankind lived like the gods, free of all evils (*WD* 109-115). By the time we reach his fifth generation of 'iron', man is now cruel. There is no honor for the codes of reciprocity and friendship. The wicked hurt the worthy man, and there is no favor for the just or good (*WD* 176-200). Hesiod characterizes this period as an uncertain and rocky time of the present when men praise hubris and injustice. He warns his audience that when a bad man harms citizens with false speeches and oaths, there will be no remedy for evil (191-201). Those sorts must be punished, he avers, either by human agency or divine.

I submit that American television belongs to this 'fifth age' but, unlike Hesiod, we feel rather good about it. The success of shows like *Breaking Bad*, *Sopranos*, and *House of Cards* illustrates that American audiences today truly enjoy dramas that feature wicked men passing into good fortune—the kind of plots that Aristotle defined as the least tragic. Why? I argue that the attraction of these shows is the enjoyment we feel watching a clever trickster—an Odyssean hero—succeed through his own ingenuity and ambition, anticipating that eventually this character will step over the line into tyrannical behavior, necessitating punishment.

The character of Frank Underwood of *House of Cards* is representative of the hubristic 'fifth generation' hero type, whose egotism and contempt for everyone, including the show's audience, we admire and praise—up to a point. I interpret *House of Cards* as a democratic social drama in the Victor Turner sense (1974). If a tyrant breeds hubris to the point when he becomes a clear danger to democracy and to everyone in society, he must be punished—transformed into a ritual scapegoat whose sacrifice will preserve and restore social justice. The audience of social drama anticipate the satisfying moment when democracy and social harmony is restored through the ritual punishment of the evil-doer.

I suggest that, as ‘the wicked man passing from bad to good fortune’ (Arist. *Poet.* 1452b), the character of Frank Underwood presents us with an Odyssean trickster figure. *House of Cards* works because the show capitalizes on our secret envy and admiration of a character type whose spectacular command of rhetoric, low cunning, and deep understanding of human fallibility enable him to rise politically. Like Odysseus, Underwood is *polutropos*—“the kind of man the occasion demands” (Soph. *Philoctetes* 1050); he adapts himself to every situation, craving victory at any price. “For those of us climbing to the top of the food chain, there can be no mercy,” Underwood declares, “There is but one rule “hunt or be hunted.”

Like Odysseus, Underwood is *polumêtis* 'a man of many schemes'. He is a master of persuasion who uses deceit, flattery, slander, and emotional manipulation to attain his goals. As *House of Cards* progresses through three seasons, Frank Underwood becomes less of a clever Odyssean trickster and more like an Aristogeiton—an Athenian public figure excoriated by the orator Demosthenes as *ponêrotatos* 'most wicked', corrupt, and dangerous to democracy that he must be executed to save society (Rosenbloom). Frank's political opponent on the show, Heather Dunbar, echoes Demosthenes when she casts Frank as an immoral liar

who flouts the law, stating that Frank is a dangerous man because power in the hands of those who lack honesty lacks a moral compass.

Beau Willimon, the creator of the Netflix *House of Cards* version of the BBC mini-series of the same name, adopts the BBC series use of direct address to "give the audience access to Underwood's manipulations" (Gross). If we view the show as a social drama, these frequent asides make the audience Frank's accomplice in crime, as well as his victim, as he rises through the political ranks through one wicked machination after another: "Do you think I'm a hypocrite?" Frank asks us in Season Two, "Well, you should. I wouldn't disagree with you. The road to power is paved with hypocrisy. And casualties. Never regret." At first, we are thankful and a little proud to be included in the cunning politician's inner circle, but by the end of Season One we are disgusted when the clever scoundrel drags us too far into his heinous crimes; do we remain Frank's allies, or judges? As Demosthenes states to the jury of Aristogeiton's wicked actions: we must denounce and punish him to save ourselves and our society...the utterly wicked...are said to be taught wisdom only by suffering (Dem. 25).

Season Two of *House of Cards* ends with Frank Underwood maneuvering himself into the presidency 'without a single vote cast'. The thoroughly evil politician with the initials FU seems to have achieved his goals. Yet, as Hesiod says of the fifth generation, "not even a prosperous man can bear hubris lightly, but is weighed down under it when he runs into divine retribution" (*WD* 214-15). In Season Three, Frank's 'house of cards' begins its inevitable collapse. As his abuse of power escalates, his allies on the show, including his loyal wife, are finding Frank less a *polumêtis* Odysseus and more a *ponêrotatos* 'most wicked' Aristogeiton. The fifth generation is still in progress, and I submit that, as a social drama, *House of Cards* will unite us all around the eventual punishment of this hubristic leader. Act Four is still to come.

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