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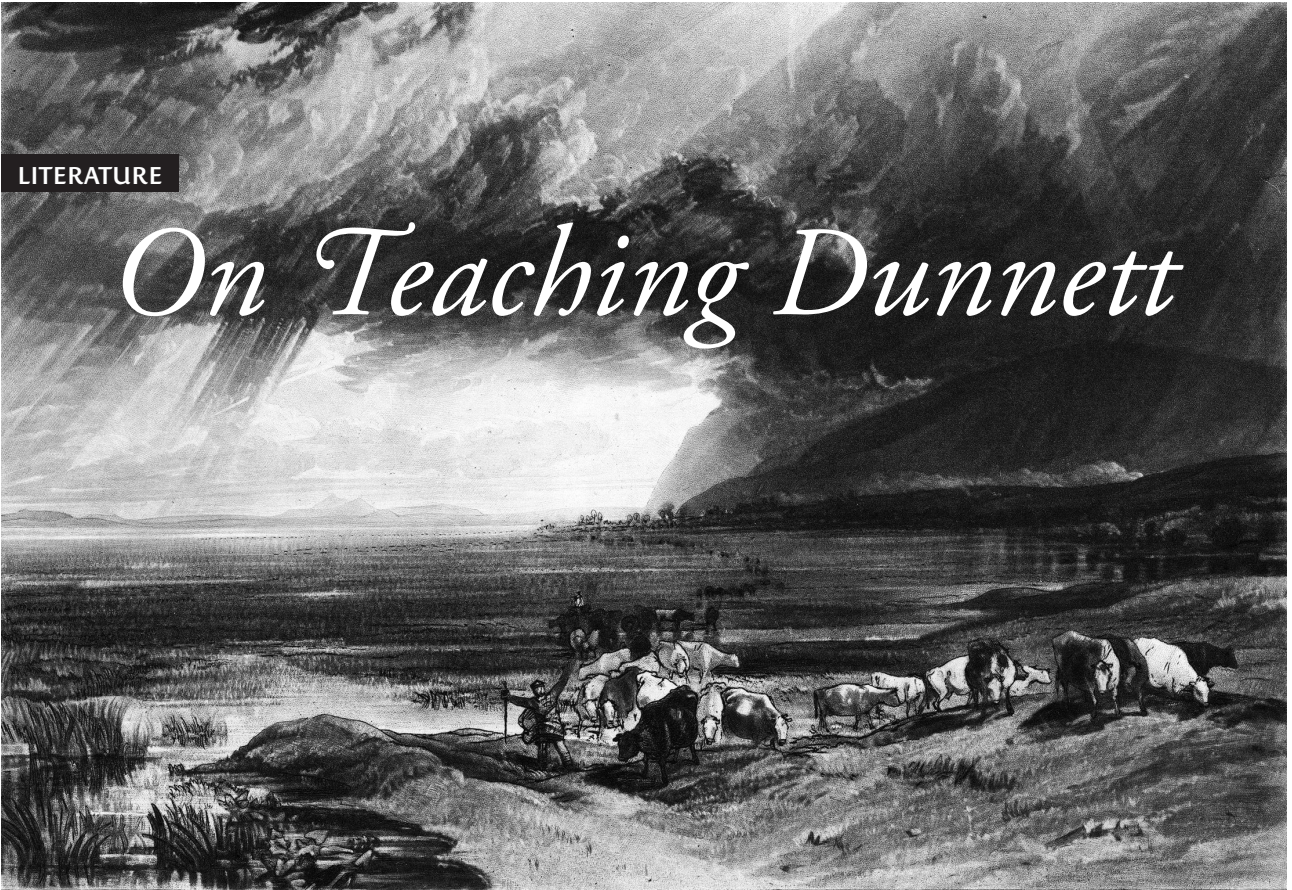
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Recommended Citation

Scott Richardson. "On Teaching Dunnett." *Whispering Gallery* no. 136. September 2017, pp. 20-23.

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On Teaching Dunnett



Scott Richardson

Most of us recommend Dunnett to anyone with a pulse: friends, relatives, grocery store cashiers, florists, diners at the neighbouring table at restaurants, museum guards. We go on our way and hope the proselytising has borne fruit. Occasionally we learn of a success, but even then it might be a matter of brief utterances of praise or thanks, on good days half of a lunch hour chatting about the novel. As a literature professor, I have had the rare and joyful opportunity both to coerce my captive audience to read Dunnett and to spend four hours talking with them about the experience.

In my college in Minnesota I periodically teach an honours course called Great Books, in which I have my very bright undergraduates read *The Game of Kings*. The level of conversation cannot, of course, match what I have experienced at the four DDS meetings I have managed to attend, gatherings of the devoted and the expert. In class I am dealing with the previously uninitiated, a batch of twenty-one-year-olds who are very keen on reading high-quality literature and who wonder why they are asked to read an author they have never heard of. Beginners though they are, these students spend the four class sessions on *The Game of Kings* in serious and thoughtful discussion of this new author and puzzling novel. In class I can offer an opportunity most of us did not have when we first encountered our beloved author: a venue for discussing the joys and frustrations of the first reading of the first novel.

Great Books is a full-year honours literature course comprised of top students, with a variety of academic special-

ties, who have in common an eagerness to read the best authors. Our format is class discussion, with the professor serving largely as moderator, occasional fount of knowledge, and poser of key questions. I do not lecture apart from strategically placed five-minute spiels to provide cultural background, and if I promote a particular interpretation, I do so by my leading questions and by remarks I make as a participant in the general conversation. The students are not gathered to listen to the professor's authoritative pronouncements but rather to take ownership of the books themselves by talking through their ideas, reactions and interpretations while listening carefully to those expressed by their classmates as well as the professor.

Most of the works assigned are those generally regarded as classics from ancient to recent times, but some are lesser-known books regarded by one or more of the Great Books professors as outstanding. Dunnett is far from the only author my students do not know. Besides *The Game of Kings*, I assign works by Isak Dinesen, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Pär Lagerkvist as well as the likes of Tolstoy, Austen, Euripides, Plato and Shakespeare.

Approaching an unknown in a course full of standard classics naturally evokes a bit of suspicion on the students' part, even after they have learned to trust my judgement and taste. We have all met sceptical grimaces and dismissive headshakes when we rave about this unfamiliar author. So imagine the resistance (usually unexpressed, but I can feel it) when, in the midst of such greats as *Moby Dick*, *Madame Bovary*, the *Inferno*, *Jane Eyre* and *Don Quixote*, I throw in a long novel that no one they know has ever heard of. So I approach this novel from a disadvantageous position.

Above: *Solway Moss* by JMW Turner, 1816. Credit: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Rogers Fund, 1962.

That handicap is exacerbated when they read the first assignment and meet the oblique quality of Dunnett's plot exposition, her rich vocabulary, and the subtlety of her dialogue. Will it be worth the struggle? Many of us, now that we are at home with her style and manner, have forgotten the assault of those initial hours of reading.

Like me at their stage, most of them do not at first know what to make of *The Game of Kings* for quite a long stretch, though right away they feel the power of the prose and the masterful pull of the narrative. We must be patient readers, I tell them, and not expect to follow the plot clearly until early in Part Two, about the time when we gain some understanding of what Lymond is up to – why he has returned to Scotland and what Jonathan Crouch has to do with anything. Even by this point the reader is still largely in the dark, not a place most young readers like to be, but there is a glimmer here of the full picture, and my students are generally pulled in after that.

Before that, however, it is a matter of trust in their kindly professor, who keeps trying to convince them of his impeccable taste in literature as a bulwark against dismissing this novel early on as a frustrating exercise in beautifully worded mystification. They read upwards of two hundred pages before our first class meeting, so they have crossed onto relatively solid ground. Even so, we spend much of the first day circling like a falcon around the juicy story we are not quite ready to pounce on yet. We must deal with the problem we encounter in discussing any novel after the first assignment: the limitations of the readers' awareness and the professor's desire to avoid the sin of spoiling the plot greatly restrict any serious analysis. But with *The Game of Kings* the problem goes well beyond partial knowledge of the plot. In most novels, even if you cannot predict the plot twists, the characters' destinies, and the ending, you can still get a good notion of what is happening, what the characters' motivations are, and where in general we are headed after the first third of the narrative. Not so with *The Game of Kings*, as my honours students, used to catching on far earlier than their typical classmates, learn to their embarrassment and, in some cases, irritation.

We cannot waste our first day, however, even though the students have only a fuzzy idea about why Lymond is now in Scotland, what exactly he intends to do, and how these specific men he is searching for are involved. Still, without giving anything away, I can turn them toward a few of the major topics and prepare the way, more than they know, for our upcoming reading and class discussions. And they do need such preparation more than for most books. It is a mistake to dwell very long on the difficulty of navigating the narrative, but it is a good idea to address it. I might ask who has a pretty good understanding of what is happening now, and when I see no raised hands, I commend them for reading it properly. There is a noticeable sense of relief in a roomful of hotshots who have spent their literature-class years frustrated with obtuse classmates who could not follow the plot of a Mark Twain story and are now in the awkward and unaccustomed position of bewilderment themselves.

After a few words about the pleasures of delayed grati-

fication, I ask them to explain why they think it is that they are in a nebulous position, even though this seems a straightforward narrative like a good old-fashioned 19th-century British novel, not a literary experiment such as we encounter with Nabokov, Joyce, Pynchon or Borges (all authors we usually do read during the year, a couple of them earlier). I am content if some suggest that the narrator is keeping a lot of secrets from us for a longer stretch than we normally experience. Then we can point to some secrets that we have already learned after a good dose of ignorance, such as the delightful Hume Castle episode that never fails to win them over to an admiration of Lymond, even those down on him until now. We learn along with Will Scott what the narrator, Lymond, and a few others have known about the whole time: Lymond's certainty that Will will disobey orders and that Lymond will stage a masquerade that will spring the prisoners and shame the English. In this case, being left out of the secret has led to great pleasure in reading, so we, perhaps sooner than Will, forgive the parties in the know for keeping us in the dark and even recognise postponement of clarity in a positive light as a source of narrative joy.

It would be unsatisfactory for me simply to tell the students what I just wrote. If among themselves they can share their frustrations and, with a slight prod from me, recognise through their conversation that the narrator, usually so helpful in 'normal' books, has a secretive nature, we have progressed considerably even before we sink our teeth into any characters or scenes. They have arrived, as though on their own, to a realisation of what will serve them very well as they read the rest: Dunnett's primary narrative strategy, delayed disclosure of important facts and circumstances. And some have said out loud that poor comprehension for a time has led to a pleasurable payoff upon discovering the full picture. Once they have reached this point, I can merely suggest that we will have a lot more of this kind of joy in narrative obfuscation to come. What has likely been an annoyance in their reading has metamorphosed for many into a positive, and it has not taken much from me to get them to this stage, just a couple of nudges and the opportunity to air their reading experience so far.

My next move typically is to confess one of my defining personality quirks: the view of daily life as a game. Playing actual games, especially duplicate bridge, takes up a lot of my waking hours, but even beyond that I tend to see my dealings with other people in terms of game-playing, with strangers regularly seen as my opponents and my friends and loved ones probably on my own side, but one can never be sure. Have others felt anything similar, even if not to the neurotic extent of their professor? No surprise, we get a voluble discussion of the place games play in our approach to regular situations in our everyday lives, with several specific examples and incidents cheerfully described. Some students are more self-conscious of this element in their interpersonal relationships than others, but the anecdotes tend to resonate with the group, especially those having to do with dating, family members and authority figures. Someone usually brings up a couple of books I

have happily never read which delineate the 'rules' in incipient romantic relationships, and most admit that dating is a kind of game.

What are the implications of this image of life for the

At some point during this session ... I raise the question of the value of historical fiction.'

way we deal with relationships with other people, especially those close to us? At this point the students are primed to delve into both the advantages of this commonly shared attitude and the inherent drawbacks. I need to do little beyond posing this

question and they are off to the races. Certain moral problems tend to arise early in the discussion of treating other people as obstructions to success or as pieces to be used to attain one's goal. If no one else eventually mentions Kant, the moral thinker deeply troubled by our inclination to see people as means rather than as ends in themselves, I do; but even without this specific reference most can speak well about the dangers in seeing our decisions and actions as moves in a game. I sit there looking duly guilty of ethical misconduct. The fun of social games, on the other hand, does not go without some defence, so the 'life is a game' metaphor turns out not to be all bad. The games inherent in politics and diplomacy as well as in adversarial relationships beyond a personal level will also come into play before we exhaust the topic.

That might be all we get to in the first hour. If so, I am happy with the progress. We have addressed the nature of Dunnett's narrative and explored the governing metaphor of the novel. We might have attached the game discussion directly to the novel – to certain scenes, to Lymond's character, to adversarial encounters, to family relationships. But even if during this part of the conversation not one word about the novel has emerged, we have nevertheless talked about it profitably. When we turn to the plot and characters, the game metaphor will colour our observations and interpretations. Also, the moral and personal estrangement that must in some way accompany the treatment of others as players in a game will serve us well when we grapple with Lymond's ambivalence: his yearning for connection and his equally strong inclination to distance himself.

By the second day the class is more than halfway through the novel, and it is time to direct our attention to the text itself. At some point during this session, however, if not in the first, I raise the question of the value of historical fiction. Since most Dunnett aficionados are avid readers of historical novels, such a question might well sound superfluous, if not silly, but my clientele do not as a rule come with this passion. Whereas most would look at me with bafflement if I asked about the value of reading Harry Potter or the Game of Thrones tomes, fantasy being a self-evident good, a story set hundreds of years before the authorship does not strike the students as automatically compelling or even sensible. Again, I could tell them why there is intrinsic worth in a well-told tale set long before the author was writing, and I do have several points written down in my notes in front of me, but my purpose is to

coax them to think of their own defence of such a project. So, I ask, if you had to explain to a friend why you are bothering with a work of fiction for which the author had to do extensive historical research in order to fit her story within the confines of a distant time and its antiquated society and historical restrictions, how would you justify this apparently bizarre activity when you could be reading a book set in the contemporary world the author knows firsthand? We can all answer this softball question in our own ways, and I do put in one or two suggestions myself when they fit, but the goal here is to elicit some serious pondering and exchange over an important question they might not have consciously thought to ask.

Those familiar with my own idiosyncratic approach to The Lymond Chronicles will not be surprised that the first set of questions I pose regarding the novel itself concerns the character of Lymond. Fortunately, long before we have a full understanding of his mission and a fair idea of his moral worth, we can arrive at some judgement over his personality and intentions which, while shifting constantly as we go along, stay with us to a great extent to the end. Some of what we say after the first half will be outdated by the third or fourth class session, but we have by now already experienced the full range of Lymond's moods and tactics and have changed our opinion of him a few times, so our vocalised impressions of him now will hold in large part for the rest of the novel.

I often begin a major conversation topic by dividing the class into small groups, keeping myself quiet, so that all students can speak up in a format amenable to first stabs at articulating thoughts and observations. This method also has the virtue of shoring up their courage to speak out before the whole class since one can evoke team solidarity and ascribe a contribution to 'our group'. I usually use small groups for some of the topics above; I always do so when I ask them what we make of Lymond so far. What makes him tick? What is his personality really, behind the various guises? What are his virtues and defects?

I like to start the examination of the novel itself in this way rather than ask the question on everyone's mind: What the heck is going on? We will get to that later, after we have given the problematic hero a thorough analysis, since what is going on is inextricably entangled with the nature of Lymond himself. This discussion about the protagonist does not, of course, answer all the questions about the plot so far, but we are better off addressing the bizarre antics, cryptic scenes, intentions behind the action, and background to the present circumstances after we have come to terms with the paradoxical character at the centre and with our feelings toward him. I certainly have some ideas of my own, as we all do, but in this context I am eager that the students' own impressions and interpretations be bandied about, challenged, refined, reformulated, and sometimes passionately argued. Unlike some texts, a novel admits of a plurality of interpretations, so there is no 'correct' answer to come out of this discussion. I do not feel remiss in not treating them to my own well-considered assessment of Lymond and his mission. I do contribute some of my own thoughts along with theirs, and they by

and large pay attention to the professor, so if there is something I find really important missing from the conversation, I have the opportunity to throw it in. But it is not my intention to persuade them that I have the key to the book or the characters nor to make sure that they know all of my allegedly expert insights. Rather, I wish to guide them with my questions toward analyses arising from their own observations that will be adjusted and tutored by comments made by their classmates as well as by me.

Because I group my assigned readings in a significant way, my own ideas and preferred topics naturally emerge tacitly from what we have been reading lately. I have assigned *The Game of Kings* under the rubrics of 'Problematic Heroes', 'Manipulation' and 'Troubled Identities', and I always assign it directly after the *Odyssey*, convinced as I am that Lymond shares a great deal with my pet ancient hero and that Homer would have appreciated the Scottish author's worldview and predilection for indirect communication. That juxtaposition necessarily colours the students' reading of *The Game of Kings* even before I open my mouth, and a comparison takes little encouragement from me. After having tackled Odysseus in terms of theatricality, espionage, confused identity, and misdirection and playfulness on the part of both hero and author, the alert students naturally start talking about this novel along similar lines. I am all but superfluous.

At about this time, if no one has yet done so, I invoke the metaphor that regularly intrudes into our discussions from the first class of the year: life is a play. Now we can look at this image of everyday life in relation to its close cousin, the life-is-a-game metaphor discussed the first *The Game of Kings* day. Theatricality raises similar points about the distancing effect of seeing other people in terms of a scripted play rather than as autonomous beings in their own right. We will already have applied this line of reasoning to a number of books, and now we can do so with this novel as a way of understanding Dunnett's portrayal of human and political relationships, Lymond's ambivalence, and the moral and personal implications of manipulation.

The last two class hours build on the general discussions of the first two and zero in on the events, characters, and implied observations about society, relationships and identity. We now take more care in analysing certain scenes (some selected by me, some arising from the discussion), and we examine the actions, mentality and morality of several characters besides Lymond.

Now is the time to consider Lymond's behaviour toward Christian Stewart, even if we have already touched on the first Christian scene, with some irritation if not hostility toward the manipulative Lymond, since she is most people's favourite character (mine too). When we learn that she has outwitted Lymond by feigning ignorance of his identity, we make of this relationship an illustrative example of the way relationships work in this world: never straightforward but based on partial or mutual ignorance, unstated feelings (sometimes recognised, sometimes not), coded communication, studied misdirection, misplaced trust and mistrust, and, somewhere in there, passionate feelings of love or hatred. Lymond's considerate lie to

the dying Christian is in keeping with this basis of their friendship, and we are forced to acknowledge that the hero's penchant for deceit and manipulation can sometimes serve a humane purpose.

The related matter of appearance and reality involves us in an examination of key scenes and of the gradual revelation of hidden truths and facts. I might save this issue until the unmasking of Andrew Hunter, which reveals that much of what we, along with several

'What is Lymond's personality really, behind the various guises? What are his virtues and defects?'

characters, assumed to be the case turns out to be false. We extend this discussion to our entire experience of reading a novel that intentionally misleads us at every turn, challenging our faith in what meets the eye and giving us yet another reason to admire the lateral-thinking hero we have snarled at more frequently than perhaps he deserves.

I will mention only two more of the big topics I always raise in the last two classes. The conflict between Lymond and his older brother attracts our attention early on, and we do bring up the sibling rivalry in the opening class. After the reconciliation scene that springs from Lymond's wound at Hexham, however, we can work on this rivalry in a broader fashion and speak of Lymond and Richard as representations of two conflicting views of the world, human behaviour and moral action. I read aloud a section of *The Prince* (which we read the previous semester) and suggest that Lymond is Machiavellian and Richard stands for standard morality. I do not believe this contention, but it seems that several characters in the novel would buy into it. The students readily find holes in this argument and, in doing so, work towards a formulation of the dichotomy the brothers' characters suggest that does justice to the subtlety and genius of the author's achievement.

We end with the ending, both the novel's climactic, interlaced trial and card-playing scenes and the readers' final sense of fulfilment and/or incomplete understanding. The trial seems to be intended to give us a sense of civic order amid the turmoil and chaos, but does it? Everything seems to hinge on luck – will Will beat the tarocco champion for the exculpating document? For all of Lymond's intricate machinations and exercise of enormous skill, it all comes down to a game largely dependent on the luck of the cards and on the accidental good fortune that Will happens recently to have learned the necessary skills. What are the implications of this ending? And how do we feel about it after a long series of manipulations and deceptions by the author? Relieved? Satisfied? Irritated?

The final question: Is Lymond a good man? By now we know there is no simple answer.

I very much look forward to the joy of assigning this book again next winter and tuning in to the next batch of young people as they grapple with the complicated hero, cryptic scenes, mystifying narrative and delayed revelations. Their eagerness to figure out what the author offers them in fits and starts brings me back to my own first reading of this brilliant novel. A gratifying nostalgia.

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