

John S. Bugbee

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Education

Ph.D., University of Virginia, Religious Studies. Committee Kevin Hart (dir.), Larry Bouchard, Charles Mathewes, Vittorio Montemaggi (Notre Dame England), James D. Kinney (English) Aug. 2024
Ph.D., University of Virginia, English Language and Literature. Committee A.C. Spearing (dir.), Elizabeth Fowler, Peter Ochs (Religious Studies), James Nohrnberg Jan. 2008
M.A., University of Virginia, English Language and Literature (Medieval) May 2003
M.A., University of Virginia, Religious Studies (Philosophical Theology) Jan. 2003
Aestiva Romae Latinitatis, Vatican City (“immersion” in written and spoken Latin) summer 1998
Postgraduate work, University of Texas at Austin (French, Latin, mathematics) 1995-1998
B.A., Williams College, *magna cum laude* (dual major in mathematics and religion) 1993

Recent Book

God's Patients: Chaucer, Agency, and the Nature of Laws (U. of Notre Dame Press, 2019)

God's Patients approaches some of Chaucer's most challenging poems with two philosophical questions in mind: how does action relate to passion, to being-acted-on? And what does it mean to submit one's will to a law? Building on the work of recent critics who have pointed out the subtlety of Chaucer's approach to such fundamentals of ethics, the book asks after the source of the subtlety, and argues that much of it is ready to hand in a tradition of religious (and what we would today call “mystical”) writing that appears to have shaped the poet's thought. The book considers the Clerk's, Man of Law's, Knight's, Franklin's, Physician's, and Second Nun's Tales in juxtaposition with an excellent informant on a major stream of medieval religious culture, Bernard of Clairvaux, whose works explicitly lay out ethical ideas closely matching those detectable beneath the surface of the poems. While some of the positions that emerge – most spectacularly the notion that the highest states of human being are ones in which activity and passivity cannot be disentangled – are anathema to much modern ethical thought, *God's Patients* provides evidence that they were relatively common in the Middle Ages. The result is threefold. The book offers strikingly new readings of Chaucer's poems; it proposes a nuanced hermeneutical approach that should prove fruitful in rereading a number of other high- and late-medieval works; and, by showing how common cultural assumptions about its two fundamental questions have shifted since Chaucer's time, it provides a powerful new way of thinking about the transition between the Middle Ages and modernity.

Current Book Project

Dante's Agents: Cooperative Will and the Hidden Narrative of the Purgatorio

Dante's Agents brings questions about the relationship of action and passion to a poet even more obviously concerned with such matters than is Chaucer. The *Purgatorio* puts Dante's basic ideas about the will most emphatically on display, as the poem's action takes place in a very literal sense “under the sign” of what many medieval writers called “cooperative” willing. That sign is the sun: though the poem's basic action, the ascent of a mountain, demands great human effort, the travelers learn early that progress is possible only while the sun shines. Close investigation suggests that the sun is Dante's stand-in for a specific subcategory of “grace” discussed in scholastic writers, and that many moments in the *Purgatorio*, from Dante's encounter with Cato at its start to his consensual-but-passive immersion in the river Eünoè at its end, can best be understood – and will be seen in very new ways if they are understood – as a progressive education in cooperative willing. By the end of the course Dante has lost one guide (because Virgil, in keeping with the medieval understanding of “pagan” philosophy, has no patience for the passivity that cooperation requires) and acquired another, passing on toward deeper learning, in paradise, about the meaning of freedom and choice in a cosmos where wills freely interpenetrate each other.

Sample Article in Progress

“Dante’s Three Guides and Christianity’s Three Ways” breaks new ground in the interpretation of the *Divine Comedy* by suggesting that Dante’s guidance through the cosmos by three companions, Virgil, Beatrice, and St. Bernard, was inspired by the once front-and-center presence in Christianity of an ancient teaching about three stages of spiritual ascent, often called the purgative, illuminative, and unitive ways. Tracing the notion from its roots in the Platonic theology of Origen and Evagrius Ponticus through well-known Cistercian and Franciscan expositors of Dante’s era, the article shows that puzzling passages in the *Comedy* receive easy explanations once the stages are understood and linked to the guides. Overlooked, perhaps, because of the relevant theology’s unfamiliarity in modern times, this late-breaking entry into the question of the three figures’ allegorical meaning should open extensive possibilities for further study.

Honors, Awards, Seminar Invitations

Visting Research Associate, Wolfson College, U. of Cambridge	2016-2017
Visiting Scholar and Lecturer, Department of English, U. of Virginia	2015-present
Visiting Fellow, Faculty of Divinity, U. of Cambridge	spring 2015
Tibor Wlassics Dante Research Fellowship, U. of Virginia	2013-2014
Two-week Jerusalem-based seminar on “Dante and Theology,” U. of Notre Dame	June 2013
Year-long faculty seminar in Catholic intellectual tradition, Mount St. Mary’s U.	2012-2013
Faculty Development Award, Mount St. Mary’s U. (support for research in Europe)	summer 2011
Van Courtlandt Elliott Prize, Medieval Academy of America (see “Publications”)	2010
Thomas W. Smith Postdoctoral Fellowship at U. Texas-Austin	2008-2010
Dolores Zohrab Liebmann Doctoral Fellowship	2004-2007
Josephine de Kàrmàn Foundation Fellowship (declined)	2004
U. of Virginia Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Dissertation Fellowship (declined)	2004
Jacob K. Javits Fellowship	1998-2002
Finalist, James F. MacDonald Service Award, U. of Virginia United Ministries	2001
University Fellowship, U. Texas-Austin	1995
Phi Beta Kappa Society	1993

Refereed Publications

- “Bernard’s *Precept and Dispensation*, Charles Peirce, and a ‘General Grounding’ for Ethical and Scientific Laws.” Forthcoming Jan. 2025 at *Cistercian Studies Quarterly*.
- “Chaucer’s Lucretia and What Augustine Really Said About Rape: Two Reconsiderations.” *Traditio* 74 (2019).
- God’s Patients: Chaucer, Agency, and the Nature of Laws*. University of Notre Dame Press, 2019. Cross-disciplinary monograph (literature, theology) of 160,000 words. Reviewed to date in the *Times Literary Supplement* and nine academic journals; nominated for five book prizes.
- “Dante’s Staircase and the History of the Will.” *Speculum* 90 (October 2015).
- “Solving Dorigen’s Trilemma: Oath and Law in the Franklin’s and Physician’s Tales.” *Medievalia et Humanistica* 36 (2010).
- “Sight and Sound in St. Erkenwald: On Theodicy and the Senses.” *Medium Ævum* 77 (2008). Awarded the Van Courtlandt Elliott Prize for an outstanding first essay, Medieval Academy of America, 2010.
- “The Consequences of Metaphysics: Or, Can Charles Peirce’s Continuity Theory Model Stuart Kauffman’s Biology?” *Zygon: The Journal of Religion and Science* 42 (2007).
- “Almost Alternating Links.” *Topology and its Applications* 46 (1992). Joint authorship (research group).

Other Scholarship

- Review solicited by the journal *Christianity and Literature* of George Corbett, *Dante’s Christian Ethics: Purgatory and Its Moral Contexts* (Cambridge, 2020). To appear 2024.
- Referee for *Modern Theology*, for *The Journal of Medieval Religious Cultures*, and for *Zygon: The Journal of Religion and Science*.
- The Slaughter of the Innocents* (Feb. 2006) – translation of 12th-c. Latin liturgical play for performance by the University of Virginia Early Music Ensemble.
- “Examining Catastrophic Sustainability: Reflections” (Dec. 2004) – Two essays for conference on nature and sustainability, hosted by Maine College of Art and the art and philosophy collective Spurse.

Selected Conference Presentations and Lectures

“On the Impossibility of Human Freedom: Dante”	Renaissance Soc. of America, Mar. 2024
“Reading Unfamiliar Spiritual Texts: How-To and Why-To”	C’ville Friends’ Meeting, Jan. 2022
“Beatrice and Illumination”	Encountering Dante’s Beatrice, Leeds, July 2021
“Gentle Laws, Modern Impasses: Bernard’s <i>Precept & Dispensation</i> ”	York Mdl. Stds., July 2021
“Freedom, Truth, and Violence: <i>Paradiso</i> 4”	Dante Soc. of America, online, pub’d March 2021
“Dante’s Curious Cat” [<i>cancelled by COVID</i>]	Duke U. Mdl.-Ren. Studies Ctr., Mar. 2020
“Love, Intellect, Grace: Gaps at the <i>Commedia</i> ’s Center”	Dante & Philosophy, Villanova, Nov. 2019
“Dante’s Three Beasts: One or Two Overlooked Possibilities”	Mdl. Congress, Kalamazoo, May 2019
“Dante’s Virgil on Free Will: What’s Missing, and Why”	Mdl. Congress, Kalamazoo, May 2018
“Salvation by Other Means: <i>Paradiso</i> 20 and the Righteous Pagans”	Mdl. Congress, Leeds, July 2017
“The Implicit Love of God: Response to Perlmutter”	Noesis Society, U. of Cambridge, Mar. 2017
“The Hidden Passion of Dante’s Mary”	Mdl. Congress, Kalamazoo, May 2016
“Evolution and the Logic of Story”	American Academy of Religion, Nov. 2014
“Dante’s Mysticism of Cooperation”	AAR, Nov. 2013
“Christian Eschatology in <i>Nuce</i> ”	Davidson College (class lecture), Aug. 2013
“On the Meaning of Mary in the <i>Commedia</i> ”	Notre Dame Summer Seminar, Jerusalem, June 2013
“The Will in <i>Purgatorio</i> IX: A Medieval Grammar of Ascent”	Mdl. Congress, Kalamazoo, May 2013
“Charles Peirce’s Aids to Thought on Miracles and Laws of Nature”	AAR, Nov. 2012
“Dante’s Staircase and the Freedom of the Will”	Mdl. Congress, Kalamazoo, May 2012
“Christian Mysticism in Comparative Perspective”	Davidson College (class lecture), Oct. 2011
“A Liturgical Life and its Afterlife: The Second Nun’s Tale”	Medieval Acad. of America, Apr. 2011
“Chaucerian Zen, and Other Casualties of Modern Oblivion”	Reed College, Jan. 2010
“A Guess at Patience’s Riddle (<i>Piers Plowman</i> B:XIII-XIV)”	Texas Medieval Association, Oct. 2009
“Chaucer’s Pale Custance, Illuminated by Medieval Mysticism”	Kalamazoo, May 2009
“Science, Religion, Academic Freedom: Evolution and Stem Cell Research”	Panel, U. Texas, Apr. 2009
“Evolution in Charles Peirce’s Arguments for the Reality of God”	AAR, Nov. 2008
“Pre- and Post-Modern Laws of Nature: Case Studies”	U. Texas–Austin, Feb. 2008
“Chaucer’s Varieties of Patience: Agency in Two Canterbury Tales”	Baylor U., Jan. 2008
“Peirce, Hegel, and Stuart Kauffman’s Complexity Theory”	AAR, Nov. 2005
“A Boethian Root of Aquinas’s Ethics, with Consequences for Moral Luck”	Kalamazoo, May 2004
“Sight and Sound in <i>St. Erkenwald</i> , With A Change of Theological Issue”	Kalamazoo, May 2003

Selected Teaching Experience (Chronological by Position)

University of Virginia – Departments of English and Religious Studies

Chaucer (majors seminar)	spring 2020
Convener: Proseminar in World Religions and World Literatures (master’s level)	spring 2018

Semester at Sea – Lecturer, Religious Studies

World Religions	spring 2016
Christianity	spring 2016

Mount St. Mary’s University – Assistant Professor, Department of English, 2010-2013

Chaucer (majors seminar)	fall 2011
God and the Poets in Medieval England (majors seminar)	spring 2011
Medieval Women (majors seminar)	fall 2012
The English Language (majors seminar)	spring 2012
Dante (majors seminar)	spring 2013
Renaissance to Revolutions (literary survey)	spring 2011, 2012
The West in the Modern World / Literature (themed survey: technology)	fall 2012
Origins of the West (literary and historical survey)	fall 2010

University of Texas at Austin – Postdoctoral Fellow, Center for Core Texts and Ideas, 2008-2010

Medieval Thought and Literature (introductory level)	spring 2009
World Scripture – Literary Approaches (introductory level)	fall 2008, fall 2010
The Scientific Revolution via its Great Texts (upper-division seminar)	spring 2010

University of Virginia – Departments of English and Religious Studies	
Instructor: Introduction to Literature – Shakespeare’s Women (sophomore level)	spring 2008
Instructor: Introduction to Literary Studies (sophomore level)	fall 2003
Instructor: Freshman Composition	spring 2003
Instructor: The Western Media and the Middle East (junior level in Media Studies)	spring 2004
Co-Instructor: Science, Language, and God (graduate seminar, religious studies)	fall 2005
Teaching Assistant: Medieval and Renaissance Literature (majors’ survey)	fall 2002
Teaching Assistant: Religion and Modern Fiction (intermed. level, religious studies)	spring 2000
Teaching Assistant: Theology, Ethics, and Medicine (intermed. level)	fall 1999

Teaching Outside the Traditional Classroom

Reading groups on Dante, in person and online via //TheTreasures.org	2015-16, 2017-present
“Philosophical and theological classics” groups (Boethius, Bernard, Bonaventure)	2018-present
Summer seminars on Charles Peirce	2003, 2004

Selected University and Community Service

Organizer for a new M.A. program in World Religions and Literatures, U. of Virginia	2014-2018
Curricular development work, Mount St. Mary’s U. (medieval consultant for Western Civ.)	2010-2013
English department liaison for joint program with education school, Mount St. Mary’s	2010-2013
Established collaboration between Mount St. Mary’s and Mepkin Abbey	2010-2013
English department sponsor of student “Faith and Field” initiative, MSM	spring 2011-2013
Assessor for English department’s Watterson (undergrad. essay) prize, MSM	spring 2011
English department self-assessment exercise (one of three assessors), MSM	spring 2011
Preparation of students for sacramental confirmation, Holy Comforter Catholic Church	2007-2008
Organization of petitions and events on environmental, political, and academic issues	1999-present

Languages: German, French, Latin, Koine Greek, Italian, Old French, Old English

Memberships: Medieval Academy of America, Dante Society of America, American Academy of Religion

References (dossier available on request)

Anthony C. Spearing Fellow of Queen’s College, Cambridge; Emeritus Prof. of English, U. of Virginia	Larry D. Bouchard Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies, U. of Virginia
Barbara Newman Professor of English, Religion, and Classics, and Evans Professor of Latin, Northwestern U.	Kevin Hart Edwin B. Kyle Professor of Christian Studies, U. of Virginia
Robin Kirkpatrick Emeritus Professor of Italian and English Literature, U. of Cambridge	Peter Ochs Emeritus Professor of Modern Judaic Studies, U. of Virginia
Elizabeth Robertson Professor of and Chair of English Language and Linguistics, U. of Glasgow	John A. Milbank Professor Emeritus in Religion, Politics and Ethics, U. of Nottingham, University Park