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For Wayne C. Booth
Teacher, Scholar, Colleague, Friend
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Wayne C. Booth was born in American Fork, Utah, in 1921, and was raised as a devout Mormon. As he pursued academic questions at Brigham Young University (BA), he wrestled – without ever thinking of the word “rhetoric” – with conflicts between official Mormon rhetoric and the rhetoric of major Western thinkers. Then, as a deeply conflicted Mormon missionary (1942–4), he slowly discovered the resources of what he now calls rhetorology: the pursuit of a rhetoric relying on the common ground one hopes to find underlying any controversy. As a student at the University of Chicago, and later as a professor there, he slowly discovered the history and importance of rhetorical studies. As his chapter here recounts, that discovery was the main influence on most of his publications.

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David J. Smigelskis, former Chair of the Committee on Ideas and Methods at the University of Chicago, has, for over thirty years, channeled significant teaching energies into exploring ways of better cultivating deliberating, reflection on its sources, and the relations of deliberation and reflection to other modes of inquiry.

Nancy S. Struever is Professor Emerita of Johns Hopkins University. Her primary scholarly interests are in the history of rhetoric, with special reference to the relation of rhetoric to politics, history, and ethics.
Stephen H. Webb is Professor of Religion and Philosophy at Wabash College. He has written six books, including *On God and Dogs*, *Taking Religion to School*, *Good Eating*, and *Refiguring Theology: The Rhetoric of Karl Barth*. He is currently finishing a book on theology and theories of voice, speech, and performance drawn from theater studies. He is currently the North American Corresponding Editor and regular contributor to *Reviews in Religion and Theology*.

Joel C. Weinsheimer was hired to teach eighteenth-century British literature at the University of Minnesota, but his interests quickly moved to modern German philosophy, especially the hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer. His *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, *Hermeneutics and Literary Theory*, and *Eighteenth-Century Hermeneutics* are complemented by several translations of Gadamer’s work, including *Truth and Method* (with Donald Marshall). Most recently, he has translated Jean Grondin’s masterly biography of Gadamer, scheduled to appear in Yale Studies in Hermeneutics in 2003.
Introduction

The essays in *A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism* explore rhetoric as a practical art of deliberation and judgment, best taught and learned through concrete examples of argument, interpretation, and criticism. Historically and in our own time scholars have shown that rhetoric can very well be theorized in the strong sense that specific principles can provide direction for inquiries into thought and persuasion. But this theorizing tends to remove itself from the indeterminacies of practical life and the conflicts of representation in texts and their contexts. Moreover, many forms of what is sometimes called “rhetorical criticism” treat interpretive issues without considering the ways texts engage with complex audiences (so well articulated by James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz in their essays) or practical contemporary issues (exemplarily demonstrated in James Crosswhite’s essay), and without relating those matters to specific times and places (among others, for example, Thomas O. Sloane on Erasmus and Milton and Nancy S. Struver on Vico and Collingwood). And sometimes theorists and even critics of rhetoric undertake very abstract discussions in spite of the fact that rhetoric involves reasoning that is necessarily embedded in particular practical problems and situations. Even those well advanced in the study of rhetoric recognize that learning and mastering rhetoric requires engaging concrete texts in their specific, situated contexts. The various abilities of the good rhetorician – being able to invent terms, construct arguments, criticize faulty interpretations, and generally judge matters not susceptible to algorithmic rules – cannot be developed merely by being talked about; they must be actively undertaken in practice, by beginner and adept alike. A collection, therefore, in which concrete practice grounds and guides theorizing offers to initiates, as well as to advanced scholars, not only an account of what “rhetoric” is in the abstract, but also, more importantly, concrete experiences in rhetorical thinking across many of the disciplines in which it operates.

Essays in this collection face the challenging problems of recent developments in rhetoric, including important reinterpretations of its history, and meditate on rhetoric’s place in past cultures. All of the authors take pains to include practical examples
of how to “think like a rhetorician.” We editors have also taken care in conceptualizing the essays into a working ensemble of four parts, each section designed to illuminate the others. Part One provides interpretations of historically important articulations of rhetoric. The authors focus implicitly on a handful of terms or problems crucial to rhetoric’s intellectual development, such as “prudence,” “judgment,” “argument,” “emotion,” “ethos,” and “eloquence.” This concentration gives unity to the different historical periods covered in this section while it anticipates the defining terms of the following section. Part One is not a historical survey but a series of what Kenneth Burke calls “representative anecdotes” of some of the abiding functions and topics of rhetoric.

The essays in Part Two individually expand on the orienting concepts embedded in the first section. But this time the authors, freed of the desire to “cover” a specific part of some historical period, offer more extended, concrete analyses of specific rhetorical topoi and their problems. Part Three then extends those analyses of problems and texts, but this time the authors, freed from the need to introduce and explain fundamental rhetorical concepts or to provide historical background unfamiliar, perhaps, to the reader, concentrate on offering new ways to interpret familiar literary texts, authors, and movements.

Finally, Part Four redistributes and reassesses the terms, history, and criticism of the earlier sections. Selected rhetorical thinkers (as it were first- and second-generation rhetoricians following the rebirth of rhetoric in the middle of the twentieth century) look back over developments in rhetoric of the past fifty years. Many of these authors have been responsible for some of those developments themselves, so that they can reassess their own and others’ achievements and speculate, at least in passing, on the future of rhetoric.

Taken individually, the essays in this volume aim to contribute significant insights into their respective subjects. Taken as a whole, A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism offers a new articulation of the “field” of rhetoric and opens possibilities of sophisticated rhetorical criticism for a wide range of readers looking for new directions in literary and cultural history, theory, and criticism.

Walter Jost
Wendy Olmsted
Acknowledgments

Part One of A Companion to Rhetoric and Rhetorical Criticism introduces readers to the history of some of the most important rhetorical problems, strategies, and contexts for understanding rhetorical deliberation. Dilip Gaonkar’s general introduction formulates Plato’s famous critique in the Gorgias of demagogic oratory as aimed at pleasure, showing how Plato’s Socrates attacks this oratory because it cannot teach necessary knowledge. Gaonkar argues that Aristotle’s Rhetoric, the first treatment of rhetoric as practical reasoning, responds to the Platonic critique by identifying rhetoric as a distinct type of knowledge focused on the realm of the contingent. This distinct knowledge, variously called prudence or deliberative wisdom, uses probable not necessary arguments to inform decisions about human actions.

David Cohen’s essay explores the tensions between the exercise of reason and emotion in the deliberative speeches of radically democratic Athenian assemblies. It shows how Aristotle’s Rhetoric, the “first comprehensive treatise on oratory in the Western tradition,” articulates this tension between the wise lawgiver and the popular assembly, where anger, hatred, and personal interest dominate, and where the people’s judgment becomes clouded by pleasure and pain. Cohen traces this tension through Homer, who juxtaposes the reasoned and persuasive speech of Nestor with the deceptive speech of Odysseus, and Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War, the latter inquiring into the conflicting ways political communities settle policy, some by arguing in terms of what is advantageous in the face of the emerging conflict with Sparta, others by appealing to emotion, moral character, and abiding values. Cohen’s essay demonstrates that rhetoric and democracy were linked in classical Athens and traces the conflicting rhetorical strategies employed in the assemblies and between Athens and polities like Mytilene.

The essays that follow argue that deliberative rhetoric became central to the political, educational, and poetic activities of historically specific periods, using formulations of such rhetorical concepts as ethos, pathos, topics, style, conversation, and decorum to illuminate the social practice of using rhetorical strategies to influence attitudes,
beliefs, and actions. Brian Krostenko demonstrates that late Roman republican political culture organized itself around a set of core values typically represented as simple transparent inheritances from a partly idealized past. Yet these values could not simply be invoked. Roman rhetorical practice depended upon the aesthetic judgments of a small political elite, and orators needed to elaborate and shape these values through details of style by practicing decorum. Cicero, the best source concerning late republican Roman rhetoric, argues that particular styles become “appropriate to a topic in view of some objective.” He understands topics, ethos, and style to be dynamic and interpenetrating, and he solves problems of formulating his topic in the *First Catilinarian* by recourse to style (as Eden and Morson do in Part Two). Thus, style cannot be regarded as merely ancillary to argument. Krostenko shows in detail how the choice of style, and its elaboration by the management of tone and the use of figures of speech and other rhetorical techniques and tactics, allows Cicero to overcome the rhetorical and political difficulties he faced in the *First Catilinarian*.

Next comes a provocative essay by Marjorie Boyle, who shows how Erasmus used rhetorical, philological, and hermeneutic tools of his time to rethink the opening of the Gospel of John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word.” Not so fast, Boyle suggests; Erasmus undertook a sustained persuasive argument about the translation of the Greek *logos* (word, reason) as Latin *sermo* (speech, conversation), in that way opening up a line of inquiry about God, religion, and theology as fresh and challenging at the present time as it was in the time of the great Renaissance humanists.

After showing how Christian humanist writers debated biblical and theological problems, Arthur F. Kinney accounts for the Renaissance discovery of rhetoric as the basis of poetics, beginning with Petrarch’s unearthing of Cicero’s *Pro Archia poeta* in Liege in 1333. Kinney shows how ancient texts became living presences and models to be imitated by Renaissance writers. These writers found moral philosophy and rhetoric to be inseparable, not only because both are concerned with the practical realm of human affairs, as Victoria Kahn later states the matter, but also because (in Cicero’s view) language raises man above the animals and enables him to create a consensus and community. In the Quattrocento authors wrote in such a manner as to teach readers to exercise judgment and discrimination in reading. Kinney shows how Renaissance literary and rhetorical texts were written to educate readers by providing examples of human action.

Wayne A. Rebhorn, taking a quite different tack, analyzes George Puttenham’s seemingly modern sensibility, displayed in criticisms of carnivalesque rituals and the popular poetry of the Middle Ages, only to show the extent to which Puttenham’s treatment of *elocutio* displays carnivalesque qualities of its own. Like Bialostosky in Part Four, Rebhorn draws on Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque body of carnival, which emerged from the depths of folk culture and fructified the high culture of the Renaissance in the works of Boccaccio, Rabelais, Cervantes, and Shakespeare. Bakhtin sets in opposition the grotesque body of carnival to the classical body associated with high culture. Rebhorn uses this distinction to show how Puttenham, though he teaches his readers how to avoid deformities and disproportions, is also deeply
invested in carnival. In this way Puttenham’s *The Arte of English Poetry* differs from one of its most important subtexts, Joannes Susenbrotus’ handbook of rhetorical figures, *Epitome troporum ac schematum* (*An Epitome of Tropes and Schemes*). In contrast to the latter, the *Arte* “degrades the high . . . and embraces the carnivalesque figure of the rogue and the clown.”

In the early modern, modern, and contemporary periods, rhetoric came to provide an alternative to and sometimes a crucial dimension of philosophy for investigating and making cogent arguments about particular matters. Victoria Kahn demonstrates that Hugo Grotius in the seventeenth century “draws not only on Roman law (the usual view), but also on Roman rhetoric to articulate a theory of social relations that is deeply informed by a rhetorical worldview.” More specifically, older conceptions of natural rights that were believed to derive from God or nature were transformed by Ciceronian views of the natural sociability of man as a primary motive for the founding of communities, and of language as a condition of and opportunity for speech acts enacting the consensus of the governed (for example in the taking of oaths). In turn, Grotius’ minimalist account of natural rights afforded considerable position “to what we might call the social and linguistic mechanisms of obligation, including verbal and written promises, oaths, contracts, vows, treaties, professions of political allegiance and obedience.”

In his examination of George Campbell’s *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Joel Weinsheimer performs a similar rhetorical revisionism, demonstrating that Campbell’s reliance in the eighteenth century on Hume’s empiricist philosophy is belied by the room Campbell allows himself for the non-rule-governed nature of language. Arguing “with Campbell against Campbell,” Weinsheimer’s nuanced hermeneutic approach argues:

If the art of rhetoric cannot be understood in a technological way, in terms of rules and their application, a philosophy of rhetoric devoted to first-level knowledge stands [empiricist] epistemology on its head by refusing to reduce rhetorical practice to theory. It refuses to admit the primacy of epistēmē and thus consign rhetoric to the secondary place of communicating what is already known. Moreover, if rhetoric cannot be explained in instrumental way as the “art by which the discourse is adapted to its end,” then philosophy of rhetoric will need to explain rhetoric as something other than the mongrel creature painted by epistemology.

Finally, the essay by Herbert Simons on Kenneth Burke features Burke’s role in the “globalization” of rhetoric and provides a useful guide to what Burke liked to call “Boik’s woiks,” themselves as insightful and provocative as any speeches or writings in any time or place. Simons concludes that as a field whose scope has been greatly expanded, rhetoric needs to clarify its terms and to provide critical case studies from across the human sciences (much as the present volume seeks to do), studies that are at once theory-guided and capable of yielding further theoretical development. A systematic comparison and contrast of the stories these studies tell us would allow us to use the rhetorical legacy Burke has left us more effectively.
Introduction: Contingency and Probability

Dilip Parmeshwar Gaonkar

For Aristotle (384–332 BCE), the contingent is the unproblematic scene of rhetoric. This Aristotelian connection between the scene and agency (or practice), originally put into play to blunt Plato’s charge that rhetoric is a nomadic, hence unspecifiable discipline, persists to this day as a key, but largely unnoticed, assumption in contemporary rhetorical theory. In Gorgias, Plato (ca. 428–ca. 347 BCE) sets the “specifying” game in motion by demanding that rhetoric identify itself. He puts the identity question bluntly to Gorgias: “Who are you?” (447). “With what class of objects is rhetoric concerned?” (449). As the dialogue unfolds, Socrates poses a series of interrogatories regarding rhetoric’s identity and domicile, and predictably, neither Gorgias nor Polus and Callicles who successively undertake to respond, gives a satisfactory answer. It is not so much the amorality of rhetoric, but rather the inability of its teachers and practitioners to give a coherent account of it that finally delegit-imizes rhetoric. Beneath Plato’s ethical critique, which (in both Gorgias and Protagoras) functions more as a dramatic parody of sophistic pedagogic pretensions than as a determined scourging of evil, there is a more severe critique of rhetoric’s lack of substance. In fact, one could read Plato as saying that rhetoric’s moral deficiency springs from its nomadic quality, a quality accentuated by the itinerant character of its teachers. Rhetoric is amoral precisely because it is rootless.

Thus, on the manifest argumentative plane, Plato rejects rhetoric as a defective and incomplete art for the following reasons. First, rhetoric is rooted in a false ontology. It is content to deal with what appears to be true and good rather than inquire into what it is in reality. Second, rhetoric is epistemically deficient because it seeks to impart a mastery of common opinion rather than knowledge. Third, as an instrument of practical politics it exploits the resources of language to make the “weaker cause appear stronger” and to promote the acquisition of power as an end in itself without consideration for the well-being of the soul. Each of the three reasons for rejecting rhetoric – its reliance on appearance, its entanglement with opinion, and its linguistic opportunism – are marked, in Plato’s imagination, by instability and danger. An art
that engages such entities cannot possibly give a rational account of itself. However, at
no point does Plato deny the sheer materiality or the “felt quality” of rhetoric and its
objects, but he doubts that they constitute a specifiable domain. He recognizes that
people are constantly involved in persuasive transactions that require them to negoti-
ate a wide range of appearances and opinions, especially those sanctioned by common
sense. But those persuasive negotiations are carried out not in accordance with the
strictures of an art, but according to one’s knack, a hit or miss procedure based on
experience. Hence, the paradox of unspecifiability. On the one hand, rhetoric is very
tangible, or as McGee (1982) puts it, it impinges on our consciousness as a “brute
daily reality.” On the other hand, that reality is made up of appearances and opinions
that cannot withstand critical scrutiny. No sooner does a dialectician try to seize upon
that “brute daily reality” than it melts into thin air. One could theorize, as some
contemporary rhetorical theorists have done (Hariman 1986), about an epistemology
of appearances and opinions that would anchor rhetoric, but Plato was too old
fashioned to do it. He was content to dismiss rhetoric as unspecifiable.

Plato further elaborates on the unspecifiability thesis in *Phaedrus*, where rhetoric is
partially rehabilitated as a supplement to philosophical understanding. In the con-
cluding sections of this dialogue, Plato states precisely the conditions rhetoric must
meet to be regarded as a genuine art. Michael Cahn (1989) refers to Plato’s specifica-
tions as the “dream of rhetoric,” where the figure (linguistic strategy or utterance),
soul (psychological state/disposition of audience), function (effect sought by the
rhetor, convictions he seeks to implant) are perfectly coordinated. In short, rhetoric
must supply a “gapless” causal model of persuasion, whose validity is to be established
on the basis of its predictive capacity. But if rhetoric is unable to meet this demand,
then it must be held under the supervision of philosophy. Thus in *Phaedrus*, Plato
specifies conditions for the freeing of rhetoric from philosophical tutelage, but these
conditions cannot be met. And insofar as these conditions cannot be met, rhetoric
must remain in the margins of philosophy, held hostage in an eternal minority. At
this point, rhetoric would have neither autonomy nor specificity. It would be parasitic
on the prior philosophical achievement. Thus, Plato sets up an extraordinary prob-
lematic. His challenge to the future champions of rhetoric is straightforward:
“Unpack the riddle of rhetoric and it can go free.” To free rhetoric, one must first
give it a name, a domicile, and some specificity.

Aristotle and the “Contingency” Thesis

It is generally agreed that Aristotle’s lectures on rhetoric were partly a response to
Plato’s critique. But Aristotle’s text, by foregrounding the tripartite scheme, espe-
cially the tripartite theory of genre, obscures his response to Plato’s charge of
unspecifiability. Propelled by the tripartite scheme, the text moves swiftly into the
pragmatics of oratory. Aristotle appears to be functioning in a different key from
Plato. His initial claim that “it is possible to inquire the reason why some speakers
succeed through practice and others spontaneously” and “that such an inquiry is a function of the art” (1354.10), and his fourfold statement about the usefulness of rhetoric (1355a20–1355b5), pretty much ignore Plato’s threefold critique about appearance, opinion, and linguistic opportunism.

However, if we foreground the contingency thesis, which tends to recede into the background in the glare of the tripartite scheme, we get a different reading of Aristotle. What is Aristotle’s “contingency thesis”? To begin with, it involves a substitution. In order to specify the realm of rhetoric, Aristotle replaces Plato’s binary opposition between reality and appearance with his own binary opposition between the necessary and the contingent. Once this seemingly unproblematic distinction is accepted, that is, once rhetoric is safely located in the realm of the contingent, Plato’s charge of unspecifiability dissolves. By placing rhetoric (along with the dialectic) in the realm of the contingent, Aristotle gives it a domicile, a space within which it can manifest and contain itself. This is an extraordinarily cunning response to Plato’s critique that rhetoric is homeless. This maneuver also takes the bite out of Plato’s other two charges: rhetoric is epistemically deficient and linguistically opportunistic. Once rhetoric is placed in the realm of the contingent, it can be viewed not as epistemically deficient but as a medium/repository of a distinct type of knowledge – identified variously in contemporary rhetorical studies as “public knowledge” (Bitzer 1978), or as “social knowledge” (Farrell 1976), or as “prudential wisdom” (Leff 1999) – in short, some sort of practical knowledge in use. Similarly, the charge of linguistic opportunism can be revalorized à la Kenneth Burke as a form of bricolage, an equipment for living in an inexact world.

The Aristotelian reading of the contingent has two main characteristics. First, the contingent is posited simultaneously as the opposite of the necessary (or necessarily true) and in conjunction with the “probable” or that about which one can generate probable proof. While the opposition to the necessary hugely expands the realm of rhetoric, the association with the probable makes it manageable. When the contingent is defined strictly in opposition to the necessary, it opens up a vast space of what is uncertain and indeterminate. But Aristotle and those who follow him do not allow us to peer too deeply into the abyss of the uncertain and the indeterminate. The contingent is immediately domesticated by its association with the probable. The probable here is not one derived from mathematical or statistical probability but one associated with the everyday (thus “ideological” in Barthes’ (1972) sense of “anonymous ideology”) notion of the “usual” or “things that normally or commonly happen.” For Aristotle, at any rate, the idea of the contingent does not connote a Kafkaesque world of sheer uncertainty and terror, but rather a world made familiar by the gamesmanship and good manners displayed by those adept at ideological bricolage.

Second, the contingent is a mark of human actions because in any given situation human beings can conceivably act in ways other than they do. According to Aristotle: “Most of the things about which we make decisions, and into which we therefore inquire, present us with alternative possibilities. For it is about our actions we
deliberate and inquire, and all our actions have a contingent character; hardly any of them are determined by necessity (1357, 23–7).” (The term “contingent” appears in W. Rhys Roberts’ translation. Grimaldi in his commentaries also uses that word. However, George Kennedy (1991: 42) uses the phrase “things that are for the most part capable of being other than they are.”) Thus, the contingent is the horizon within which human actions unfold and “deliberation,” whose telos is judgment and choice, is the reflective mode of engaging in that unfolding. If human beings can act in more than one way (and if the outcome of their actions is uncertain, capable of unanticipated consequences), then it makes sense to deliberate and choose. Rhetoric is the discursive medium of deliberating and choosing, especially in the public sphere. Thus, the focus shifts imperceptibly from the scene of contingency to the agency of deliberation and decision-making. That shift is made possible by a certain conception of the probable, the usual, and the normal – a generalized social epistemology – which domesticates and stabilizes the contingent. “A Probability,” according to Aristotle, “is a thing that usually happens; not . . . anything whatever that usually happens, but only if it belongs to the class of the ‘contingent’ or ‘variable’” (1357a35–1357b). In his commentary on that passage, Grimaldi, drawing on the other works of Aristotle, stresses that “stability” and “regularity” govern the relationship between contingency and probability:

_Eikos_ is not that which simply happens, for that equates it with sheer chance. _Eikos_ possesses a note of stability and regularity which is intrinsic to the nature of the thing which is the ground for the _eikos_ proposition derived from that nature. A stabilized, but contingent (i.e., not necessary), fact can be known (Metaphysics, 1027a20–1), and it can even be used in a demonstrative syllogism (Analytica priora 32b20ff.). Obviously _eikos_ is something relatively stabilized and knowable (Analytica priora 70a4ff.) and, as such, offers ground for reasonable inference to further knowledge. (Grimaldi 1980: 62)

Thus, one begins to read the celebrated formulation regarding “the contingent and the probable” from the axis of the probable. Aristotle promotes such a reading by providing an elaborate account of probable reasoning based on enthymeme and _paradeigma_ (example) and by calling enthymeme “the substance of rhetorical persuasion” (1354a12–14). In this way, the contingent as the horizon of rhetoric recedes to the background and the probable as a mode of negotiating the contingent commands the center of attention.

The connection between rhetoric and contingency is rarely thematized as a theoretical issue in Aristotelian scholarship. To be sure, Grimaldi in his commentary explicates in detail the numerous ways in which the contingent is invoked and deployed in Aristotle’s _Rhetoric_ and in his other works. For Grimaldi, the contingent, however philologically complex, is not theoretically intriguing or problematic. It is part of the conceptual background that underwrites the rhetorical project.

The concept of contingency also gets some attention from scholars interested in Aristotle’s logical works, especially in his pioneering account of the modal terms. In
that account, the contingent is defined in terms of its difference from the two other modal operators – the “necessary” and the “possible.” There is also a further distinction between the contingent as an event and the contingent as a property of propositions.

A contingent event is one that might or might not occur. Neither its occurrence nor its non-occurrence is necessary. While a contingent event is possible, every possible event is not contingent because a necessary event is possible without being contingent. To put it simply, a contingent event is neither necessary nor impossible. From the standpoint of voluntary human agency, an event is necessary if it is not within anyone’s power to prevent its occurrence and an event is impossible if it is not within anyone’s power to bring about its occurrence. Hence, an event is contingent if it is within someone’s power to bring about its occurrence and in someone’s power to prevent its occurrence (see Cahn 1967: 24–47; Waterlow 1982).

The distinction between necessary and contingent statements or truths is more complicated. There is no easy correspondence between events and statements. Moreover, Aristotle distinguishes between two types of necessary statements, relative and absolute, based on his metaphysical view; namely, that things have real essences. In an argument, when one claims that “something must be true,” one is expected, if asked, to provide relevant reasons for that claim. In such a case, the truth of that claim is in an important sense necessitated by the reasons adduced in its support. Here the “necessarily true” is not a property of a given statement but obtains only in relation to supporting reasons. The force of that relation can be variable. A claim and its supporting reasons (or a conclusion and its premises) might be so connected that one could only assert that “something is probably true or possibly true.” Aristotle also regarded certain statements, such as the axioms of special sciences and general principles – say, the principles of contradiction – as absolutely necessary or true in themselves. An axiom expresses the essences of objects that constitute the province/field of a special science. Axioms are not derived from other propositions, but are intuited. We see the truth of axioms in particular instances. According to such a theory of essences, a contingent statement would be one “whose truth is not determined by the essence of the thing about which it is asserted.” The necessary statement is concerned with “that which cannot be otherwise than it is” and the contingent statement is concerned with “that which can be otherwise and is so for the most part, only or sometime, or as it happens” (Hamlyn 1967: 199, 198–205).

The logical explication of the contingent, as applied to events and statements, is carried out strictly in terms of its difference from the necessary. Since the concept of necessary statements/truths is a foundational topic in epistemology, there is a large and technically complex literature on it from Aristotle to the present. In that literature, the contingent stands in the shadow of the necessary, the explication of the former is a by-product of the inquiry into the latter. It is difficult to connect what one has gleaned from a philosophical analysis of the contingent to its deployment as a generalized background assumption in rhetoric, except in the most obvious sense. The philosophical clarification of the contingent as an event (what might or might not happen) and of the contingent as a property of statements (what might or might not be
true) has an obvious affinity to the sense in which the contingent ("things/matters that can be otherwise") is taken as the privileged object of rhetorical deliberation.

Aristotle states emphatically and repeatedly that no one wastes his time deliberating about things that are necessary or impossible (1357a1–8). But the characterization of the contingent as the scene of rhetoric is a much thicker notion, something more than the object and content of deliberative rationality. In my view, it signals the prefiguration of a certain vision of the human condition in general, and of political life in particular, which motivates and propels rhetoric. One of the pressing challenges of rhetorical theory today is to unpack that thicker notion of contingency.

One way to attend to that challenge is to track the career of the contingency thesis in rhetorical theory from Aristotle to the present. This would not be easy because that thesis functions as an implicit background assumption rather than as an explicit theoretical issue. One could surmount that difficulty by taking the indirect route of tracking the concept of "probable reasoning" after its initial formulation by Aristotle. Fortunately, Douglas Lane Patey provides such an account, which is brief but insightful, in the first two chapters of his Probability and Literary Form (1984). In that book, Patey is partly engaged in a polemic against what is known as the Foucault–Hacking Hypothesis regarding the sudden emergence of the modern concept of probability in the West around 1660. According to Hacking (1975: 1):

Probability has two aspects. It is connected with the degree of belief warranted by evidence, and it is connected with the tendency, displayed by some chance devices, to produce stable relative frequencies. Neither of these aspects was self-consciously and deliberately apprehended by any substantial body of thinkers before the time of Pascal.

Hacking refers to the two aspects as epistemic and aleatory. There is not much dispute about the aleatory aspect. However, Patey contests Hacking’s claim that the epistemic aspect – "the degree of belief warranted by evidence" – was generally absent prior to 1660. Hacking’s claim is based on the assumption that until the Renaissance, probability simply meant opinion supported by authority; and no notion of non-demonstrative evidence existed. Patey questions that assumption by noting that there are two ways to read the history of probability from Aristotle to Locke. In the first version, based on a selective reading of Aristotle common during the Middle Ages, probability is equated with opinion supported by authority. In the Prior Analytics (11.26.70a), Aristotle states that "A probability is a generally approved proposition"; and further, he states in the Topics (1.1.100b), that "opinions are ‘generally accepted’ which are accepted . . . by all, or by the majority, or by the most notable and illustrious of them" (Patey 1984: 4). In such an equation of probability and ‘approved opinion,’ evidence is extrinsic to the claim. It is not what Hacking calls “inductive evidence” or “the evidence of things” in the modern sense. In the second version, which draws its orientation from the skeptics, especially Carneades (ca. 214–ca.129 BCE) and Cicero (106–43 BCE), probability, still linked to opinion, is assessed on the basis of intrinsic as well as extrinsic criteria. According to Patey, Carneades’ three tests for assessing