With enough improvement in Rhetoric we may in time learn so much about words that they will tell us how our minds work.

—I.A. Richards, *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936, 91)

I will give you my argument right off the top, both to set the table for my evidence and warrants, and to ensure you have the crux of the paper on hand for the discussion period, which is always where the best scholarship gets done.

There is a long history of Four Master Tropes in figuration: Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony. It is wrong. Or, it is 25% wrong. Irony should not be the fourth master trope. Antithesis should be.

To get here, I will do four things:

1. Sketch the history of this quadruplex, the Four Master Tropes.

2. Introduce a new taxonomy.

3. Use that taxonomy to eliminate irony. I claim irony is *not* a trope, properly understood.

And

4. Show how antithesis is a much better fit, not only to the idea of Four Master Tropes, but to the arguments and claims in much of the history of that quadruplex. Most of those scholars were arguing in large part for antithesis. They just called it irony.

**Four Master Tropes**

The Four Master Tropes make their appearance in the history of rhetoric with Petrus Ramus’s 1549 *Arguments in Rhetoric Against Quintilian*. This text is important because it neuters rhetorical studies generally, especially through the pedagogical and ‘rational’ re-assignment of memory, invention and arrangement to Dialectic, leaving only style and delivery, of the ancient canons, to rhetoric. It is the lynch pin in the developments that led to many centuries when figures and tropes on the one hand, elocution on the other, dominated rhetorical studies. But, for our purposes, the important move is the creation of the four-master-tropes complex:

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raha@uwaterloo.ca http://www.arts.uwaterloo.ca/~raha/
• Metaphor – lexical substitution by similarity

• Synecdoche - lexical substitution of part for whole, whole for part, genus for species, species for genus.

• Metonymy - lexical substitution by adjuncts; especially cause-effect relations, but also ‘accidents’ generally.

• Irony - lexical substitution by dissimilarity.

For Ramus, the division is largely in service of his belligerent fastidiousness—an exercise, as Father Ong puts it, in intellectual “tidiness” (1958:274)—in cleaning up Quintilian’s “many classes of trivialities” (139) to an essential, intellectually hygienic core. But Ramus’s close associate and careful expounder, Omer Talon, was more directly interested in production and pedagogy. In his Rhetorica, he founds this quadruple arrangement on invention. Metaphor undergirds invention on similarity, metonymy on cause and effect or subject and adjunct, synecdoche on part/whole and genus/species, irony on contraries (Mack 2011:148).

Following Ramus and Talon, this quadruplex is maintained historically by Vossius (1606), Keckermann (1606), Farnaby (1625), Smith (1657), Bland (1706), Vico (1744), Ward (1759), Gibbons’ (1776), Adams (1810), Getty (1881), Burke (1941), and Rice and Schofer (1983), among many others. Vico and Burke are perhaps the most famous. Since Burke offers no attribution in his 1941 paper (later appendicized to his 1950 Rhetoric of Motives), “The Four Master Tropes,” many people think the grouping originates with him.

1 It’s a 2x2 system. The two tropes of part/whole relations are metonymy and synecdoche. The two tropes of part/part relations are metaphor and irony. See Conley (1990: 131).

2 There are, of course, multiple other threads in the tangled history of figure taxonomies generally and trope designation specifically. Others keep a larger basic inventory, many sticking to the ad Herennium’s ten or Quintilian’s twelve, going up to nineteen for Peacham and Dumarsais. (Kellen 2007:17 complains without citation of “hundreds of tropes” in the medieval period. He may be right. I am not an expert in the period. But I have encountered no inventories that large. Puttenham does go up to twenty-five for a very trope-like order of figures that he calls Sensable, “because they alter and affect the minde by alteration of sence”—1968 [1659]:148.) Jakobson (1956) reduced the fundamental tropes to two (metaphor and metonymy). The late-twentieth-century widespread reduction to one master trope, metaphor, especially under the influence of Lakoff and Johnson (1980), is the most radical (and absurd) of these projects.
So, there is a long provenance of Four Master Tropes, with utter unanimity on their constitution: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. Most iterations of the quadruplex come in dissociated taxonomies or, as with Burke, no explicit taxonomy at all. They appear, axiomatically, as the Four Master Tropes. But if we are going to interrogate them, as I want to do here—especially if I am going to make an argument that irony is not a trope—we need to do so against a taxonomic background.

**Scheme, Trope, Chroma, Move**

The taxonomy I want to defend also has four central categories—a complete coincidence—only three of which are relevant to my argument. The four categories are scheme, trope, chroma, and move.

I will assume that the ancient scheme/trope distinction in figuration along semiotic dimensions is well known here, in the company of rhetoricians. The scheme and trope categories are among the oldest in figuration, and, construed according to a simple *signans/signatum* division, the most basic and the easiest to see. Schemes are formal deviations, shifts away from conventional expectations in the usage of *signantid*. Tropes are conceptual deviations, shifts away from conventional expectations in the usage of *signata*.

Here are some prototypical schemes:

Georgie Porgie pudding and pie,
Kissed the girls and made them cry.

The schemes include rhyme (repetition of one or more concluding syllabic nuclei and codas—Georgie/Porgie, pie/cry) and alliteration (repetition of word- or syllable-initial consonants—Porgie/pudding/pie; kissed/cry). Ordinary language has words and phrases that exhibit rhyme (hot pot, nit-wit, willy-nilly, red sky in morning, sailors take warning) and alliteration (dodo, mish-mash, cuckoo, look before you leap), but they stand out against a backdrop of words and expressions in which syllabic nuclei+codas and initial consonants don’t regularly match each other in proximal syllables or words. When rhyme

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3 Deviation may strike some readers as misguided as a defining concept for figuration, because ordinary language shows such an inescapable penetration of figurative processes, but I mean it in an ideal sense, against a hypothetical utter blandness of language (Group μ’s “degree zero”—Dubois et al. 1981), and I mean it (as *deviation* always implies) in a graded sense, not a binary present/absent sense. They are deviations when they first enter the linguistic stock, but they can quickly become the new normal. Figures are routinely noticed, but they often recede into literality, blandness, invisibility, if they enter common trade, such that our daily speech is mostly an exchange of “coins with their images effaced and now no longer of account as coins but merely as metal” (Nietzsche 1995 [1873]:92).
or alliteration show up in flurries, or in strategically isolated expressions, we know we are in the presence of special sorts of language events, like poetry, oratory, or county music. But that does not mean either (1) that rhyme and alliteration depend on resources or dispositions not present in ordinary language or (2) that rhyme and alliteration are themselves absent from ordinary language. Nor is there a ‘traditional view’ of rhyme and alliteration that makes such claims.

Here is a prototypical trope, personification (non-human, usually inanimate or abstract, entities represented as exhibiting human emotions, thoughts, or actions):

Only the champion daisy trees were serene. After all, they were part of a rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity, so they ignored the men and continued to rock the diamondbacks that slept in their arms. It took the river to persuade them that indeed the world was altered. (Morrison 1981: 9)

Ordinary language exhibits personification (Mr. Clean, I’m a mac / I’m a PC, the weather is mocking me). Indeed, most languages have very basic tools for personification (a writer is a person who writes, a sailor is a person who sails; the agentive morpheme takes the word for an activity and converts it to the word for a person who habitually or professionally performs that activity), and, as with all tropes, the salience of a given personification can recede with the passage of time and the growth of familiarity until it goes largely unnoticed, so that our daily expressions are littered with inconspicuous-unvisible personifications (the camera loves her, opportunity knocks, time waits for no one—see Lakoff and Johnson 1980:33-34). When personification occurs in novel and striking ways, it is noticed and usually taken as evidence of design, of deviation away from a basic things-are-things level of signification.

The other two categories, chroma and moves, are less established, and the rhetorical instruments they cover are often mixed with tropes in other taxonomies, or show up in a separate (though frequently unsystematic) classification altogether, such as ‘figures of thought’ or ‘figures of construction.’ But they provide useful tags for understanding the range of rhetorical devices and manoeuvres that have traditionally been called figures despite not sorting neatly onto either side of the signans/signatum boundary. Chroma are deviations of intention. Moves are specific discourse strategies. They are deviations of presumed default discourse patterns.

Here is a prototypical chroma, erotema, known colloquially as a ‘rhetorical question’:

If you prick us, do we not bleed? (Shakespeare, Merchant 3.1)

The default function of a question is to elicit information. But erotema deploys with different intentions. Shylock is not looking for an answer. He is making an assertion: we are just like you. You bleed. We bleed. His intention is not to solicit information, but to assert it. Erotema show up regularly in daily language (What am I, stupid?! Is the Pope Catholic?), and its usage makes clear that chroma rely more broadly on the context of utterance in a way that schemes and tropes do not. In Group μ’s terms, chroma are “in
principle circumstantial” (Dubois et al. 1981: 131). They are understood, that is, as deviations not with reference to the signs per se, but to the context in which the signs are situated. We need to know the circumstances of Shylock’s utterance are such that he is not seeking information about Jewish anatomy, and that the circumstances of the ordinary language examples are such that the speaker would not request an assessment of her intelligence, or information about the Pope’s religious affiliations. We need, additionally, to know the intention of the rhetor. Shylock could be confused. Maybe he forgot what happens when Jews are pricked. There is nothing about the form or the concept to signal we are in the presence of a figure. The context, and the character of the rhetor, tell us this is a rhetorical question and not a linguistic question.

Rhetorical moves are strategic manoeuvres, often at the discourse level, outside the familiar linguistic domains of form or meaning, and the pragmatic domain of intention. They are quite different from schemes, tropes and chroma—not figures at all, properly understood. But they have historically been lumped in with figures, so it is useful to discriminate them from figures more properly understood. Here is a prototypical move, paralipsis (assertion in the guise of avoiding assertion):

And lately, when, by procuring the death of your former wife, you had made room in your house for another, did you not add to the enormity of that crime, by a new and unparalleled measure of guilt? But I pass over this, and choose to let it remain in silence, that the memory of so monstrous a piece of wickedness, or at least of its having been committed with impunity, may not descend to posterity. I pass over, too, the entire ruin … (Cicero 1833 [63 BCE]: 1.159)

Cicero feigns a wish to preserve delicate posterity from corruption by a record of monstrous wickedness, while making sure the magistrates get to hear a catalogue of that wickedness. Moves, again, are not really figures, but they have this in common with figures: they also permeate ordinary language. Paralipsis, for instance, is effectively the same tactic we call innuendo when it occurs in gossip.

4 The passage also includes erotema, of course, since Cicero is not looking for his ‘addressee,’ Cataline, to answer his question about unparalleled guilt, as well as another chroma, apostrophe, in which the apparent addressee is only a false front. The remarks to Cataline are fully intended to be ‘overheard’ by the real addressees, the magistrates.

5 One can certainly see why rhetorical moves have often been grouped with figures. Schemes, tropes, and chroma are understood against a hypothetical “degree zero” literality or blandness (Dubois et al. 1981), where the form draws no attention to itself, where flat and direct denotative semantics provide the only meaning there is, and where the speaker’s intention matches up identically with those semantics and the default syntactic functions of any utilized structure. Design and context are nowhere to be seen. Similarly, moves are understood against some hypothetical degree-zero form of discourse
Irony out!

Irony, then, is not a trope. Even in the conventional terms of figuration, irony does not look trope-like. If you line up the Four Master Tropes and ask “Which one of these is not like the others?” the answer is obvious, irony. Metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche are all semantic. The signification is awry. When you say “All hands on deck,” there is a ‘real’ word for the designation, sailor. When you say “The pen is mightier than the sword” there are ‘real’ words for the designations, eloquence and violence. When you say “Juliet is the sun” there is a ‘real’ word for the designation, girl. A hand cannot literally be any use unless it is part of the whole sailor. A pen cannot literally be mightier than a sword, or even mighty. Juliet cannot literally be a sphere of hot plasma interwoven with magnetic fields, 1,392,684 km in diameter. But irony is pragmatic. There is no internal anomaly. The mismatch is with the world outside the utterance. If you say “Lovely weather” it can, first of all, be literally true. Weather can be lovely. We should know. We’re in Victoria today. But if the utterance is meant ironically, there must be a mismatch with something external.

Irony is certainly not a trope in Ramus’s own definition. For him, a trope is “a change in a word” from its proper signification (141), which applies directly to metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche. But if irony was a locutionally self-contained change in word, why is it so frequently accompanied by ironic looks and intonations? Why did that awful “…not” construction show up in the 1980s? —Because the speaker’s intention is at stake, and these devices disambiguate intention.

The new category of chroma, in other words, makes more precisely clear why irony is not like the others, why it is not a trope. Intention.

In fact, irony is a chroma par excellence, utterly dependent on intention for its operation. The great contemporary theorist of irony, Wayne Booth speaks of “ironic intention” incessantly, and of the crucial step in “ironic reconstruction” as the recognition “that the author cannot have intended such and such,” but must have intended something very different (1974:19; the italics here, and in the remainder of the paragraph, are mine); the sort of critical question one asks, if ironic interpretation is at stake, for instance, is “does Browning intend … the contrast between the puritanical attack and the lecherous reality?” (148). Ultimately, it comes down to understanding “the implied author’s intention” (146);

(usually some form of argumentation), which proceeds in a bland and narrow building-block style, with no presumption or prophylaxis or deviation from a rigid, syllogistic premise-conclusion blueprint.

6 As one diagnostic of this awkward fit, I note that when the master tropes shrink, irony is the first to go. Foucault, for instance, lists three (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche—1970, 110-11; 113-4), as does Bredin (1984:46n2, 47), and Jakobson’s two poles are not metaphor and irony.
that is, to character, to ethos. All chroma have this defining feature, since they are distinguished from schemes (heavier than usual weighting on form), and tropes (heavier weighting on sense and reference), by their heavy weighting on the rhetor’s intention.

The locus of schemes is the physical signal; the locus of tropes is the semantic system; the locus of chromas is the speaker.

Booth is far from alone in finding the speaker’s intention essential for understanding irony. “Any definition of irony must [emphasize intent].” Jan Swearingen says in *Rhetoric and Irony*; “intention is an unavoidable concomitant” (1991: 209). “Irony calls attention to the speaker’s intention; this is, in fact, its central focus,” Wolfgant Braungart says in “Eironia Urbana” (2010: 329). In a recent cognitive science approach to irony, *Irony in Language and Thought: A Cognitive Science Reader* (Gibbs and Colston 2007), the word *intention* occurs over 400 times, *intent* over 290 times, *intend* another 25, for over 700 appearance of the *intention*-suite of words in a 607-page book.

A few more relevant definitions from the history of irony:

- “[Irony is] a trope expressing what it intends by saying the opposite” (Donatus—see Knox 1989:9)
- “Irony is a trope by which one thing is said while its opposite is intended” (Bede, *De Schemattibus et tropis*; cited Sweringen 1991: 209)
- “Irony is for the distinction of the meaning and the intention of any words” (Wilkins 1668: 356)
- “Verbal irony depends on knowledge of the fictional speaker's ironic intention, which is shared both by the speaker and the reader; structural irony depends on a knowledge of the author's ironic intention, which is shared by the reader but is not intended by the fictional speaker” (Abrams and Harpham 2009:166)
- “[T]he primary effect of irony … only begins when the hearer/reader notices the mismatch between … an entire proposition and the how, who, what, and where of saying it (ironia). These anomalies also have to be assessed as intentional on the part of the speaker, not as mistakes. Furthermore, the speaker has to intend that the hearer/reader realize this intention.” (Fahnestock 2011, 114)

Even when intention is not referenced directly, the concept is usually in play. Quintilian, for instance, cites “the character of the speaker” as one of the principal determinants in recognizing irony (8.6.54).

A few more relevant definitions from the history of irony:
• “The way of distinguishing an *Irony* from the real sentiments of the speaker or writer are by the accent, the air, the extravagance of praise, the character of the person, the nature of the thing, or the vein of the discourse” (Gibbons 1767:77)

• “An Irony, dissembling with an air, / Thinks otherwise than what the words declare.” (Holmes 1806: 1)

• “Irony assumes on the part of the hearer a certain acquaintance with the speaker which gives the hearer reason to believe that the sentiments uttered cannot be the genuine belief of the speaker.” (Bardeen 1884: 124)

• “Irony consists of stating the contrary of what is meant, there being something in the tone or the manner to show the speaker’s real drift” (Bain 1890: 214)

The view of irony as primarily a function of intention also accords with standard usages of the irony suite of terms that references an ironic tone, or ironic mode, or ironic stance, even an ironic personality. Irony is a function of character, of a speaker’s disposition. We know not so much that a given utterance is ironic, but that a given speaker is being ironic. Socrates, we all recall, is the archetypal ironist.

Dudley Fenner calls irony “the mocking trope” (1584, sig. D), a locution that caught on widely; Puttenham renamed it *the Dry Mock.* (1968 [1569]: 272). Mocking is an intentional stance, not a semantic relation.

**Antithesis in!**

But, then, what is at the bottom of all this *Four-Master-Tropes* talk, if one of them is so distinct from the others as to call for re-categorization? Let’s look for a theme. All of the rhetoricians who have maintained the Four Master Tropes define them pretty much the same. Metaphor is an operation of similitude, metonymy of cause/effect or contiguity, synecdoche of part/whole and genus/species relations. Irony? Irony is a matter of opposition, contrast, or contrariety. Ramus, in the first instance, says that “in irony, the opposite is indicated by its opposite” (139; 145).7 For Talon, in the second instance, irony "shifts meanings between contraries" (Mack 148).

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7 Ramus is only the ‘first instance’ in the quadruplex. Opposition and contrariety is a long-standing element of the definition: “Irony is to say something and pretend that you are not saying it,” *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* states (1434a), “or else to call things by the names of their contraries.” Opposition is neither necessary nor sufficient for irony, however. Certainly some divergence in an opposing direction is always in play with irony, but full opposition is only present in the crudest ironies.
For Vossius, irony is manifest when, “through what is said, the opposite is understood” (1606: II, 167-168). Ward says “For in every *Trope* a reference is made to two things; … where they are opposite to each other, as virtue and vice, it is called an *Irony*” (Ward 1759.1: 398). Rice and Schofer define *irony* as “a relationship of opposition made possible by the identity of one or more semantic features and the presence of one or more contrary semantic features” (1983:48). That’s not a definition of *irony*. That’s a definition of *antithesis*.

Burke, of course, as is his wont, does not bother to define *irony*, or any of the Master Tropes. He just puts them into dyads with terms of “scientific realism.” Then he shucks and jives his Burkean way around a characteristic array of overlapping notions, using established terms, if not established interpretations—*Socratic irony*, *dramatic irony*, *classic irony*, *romantic irony*, *humble irony*, and so on. But the very fact that he chooses dialectic as the scientific member of the irony dyad suggests that he sees its place among the Four Master Tropes as representing opposition. There is nothing necessarily ironic about dialectic, ordinarily understood. But there is something fundamentally oppositional, antithetical, about dialectic.

Once we see that the foundation of the fourth master trope is opposition, we not only see that irony does not rest well on this foundation, we also see what the natural framework is for the Four Master Tropes complex: cognition. Metaphor is founded on similarity, metonymy on association, synecdoche on meronymy. All of these three foundations are well established cognitive dispositions—as is opposition. Burke himself argues this in *Grammar of Motives*. “Imagine,” he says,

>a passage built about a set of oppositions (“we do this, but they on the other hand do that; we stay here, but they go there; we look up, but they look down,” etc.). Once you grasp the trend of the form, it invites participation regardless of the subject matter. Formally, you will find yourself swinging along with the succession of anti-thesis, even though you may not agree with the proposition that is being presented in this form. Formally, you will find yourself swinging along with the succession of antitheses, even though you may not agree with the proposition that is being presented in this form. ... [A] yielding to the form prepares for assent to the matter identified with it. Thus, you are drawn to the form, not in your capacity as a partisan, but because of some "universal" appeal in it. (Burke 1950: 58)

Burke is not precisely arguing in cognitive terms here, of course. The psychology dominant in this period (Behaviorism and Freudianism) did not really allow for cognitive accounts, but his quotation-marked *universal* suggests that he has in mind some order of mental principle. Jeanne Fahnestock (1999:45-85, 2004) draws extensive data and considerable theory to bear on the workings of antithesis, with several cognitive insights along the way.
“[T]he law of contrast,” Koffka says in *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, is “one of the oldest laws of association” (1999 [1935]: 607). It goes back at least to Aristotle and his tripod of mental processes (the other two being similarity, which aligns closely with metaphor, and contiguity, which aligns closely with metonymy and with the principle of proximity). *Contrast* is perhaps too mild a word here. *Antithetos* is Aristotle’s term (*On Memory* 451b18), "placed in opposition." It is the same word that anchors the label for the trope, *antithesis*. It carries the sense of pushing in opposite directions. As well as featuring prominently in the Gestalt principles of perception, opposition numbers among Ramachandran’s ten neurocognitive universal laws of art (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999).

**Conclusion**

John Quincy Adams, in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory* makes my case for me:

There are four distinct principles of association so familiar to minds of men, that they serve as the foundations, upon which the use of a word, meaning one thing, for a thought meaning another, is justified in the practice of all nations. The first of these is, similitude; the second, the relation between cause and effect; the third, the relation between a whole and its parts; the fourth is opposition. These various relations form the connecting links of all the principal tropes. Hence, it has been contended, that there are only four primary tropes; the metaphor, founded upon similitude; the metonymy founded upon the relation between cause and effect; the synecdoche, standing on the relation between a whole and its parts; and irony, the basis of which is opposition. (Adams 1810.2, 311-312)

Oh, just one editorial change: “yadda, yadda, yadda; and *antithesis*, the basis of which is opposition.”

Ramus was right in other words, or 75% right; maybe, 95% right. He was right in his organizational impulses, grouping these four together, and he was right on the defining characteristics of this natural grouping. He just got the name of the fourth master trope wrong.

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