

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)

This argument has been in circulation for a few years, dating to a presentation I gave in 2013, with a couple of hundred of downloads. Perhaps some of you have seen it. But I haven't had much feedback—a few supportive emails, no real interrogations or resistance—and now I'd like to take it to prime time and publish it formally. So, I've brought it to RSA for a bit of a shake out. I am trusting you to be as rigorous and helpful in your critiques as RSA audiences always are.

Also, in this context, I would like to stake my claim to the "Biggest Change" prize at RSA 2016. In a conference on Rhetoric and Change, I am proposing to change half a millennium of rhetoric, and to do it in a half hour. So, Randy Harris for "Biggest Change" Prize. Vote early. Vote often.

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.

Context is criterial for irony. You don't get irony without reference to the situation in which it is uttered. "What a lovely day" is ironic, for instance, when everything is going to hell. Context certainly contributes to our understanding of individual metaphors, metonymies, and synecdoches, but it is not criterial.

Irony is primarily intentional. The one element of the context that is most criterial is what the speaker intends by an utterance. "What a lovely day" is not ironic for the character Nux in *Mad Max: Fury Road*, even though everything is going to hell around him, and he is about to crash and probably going to die, because for that character, things going all to hell is what he lives for, and dying



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would be lovely for him.

A metaphor, a metonymy, or a synecdoche is what it is, independently of context and intention. They are matters of language, not of language-world mapping. "My love is a red, red rose" would be a metaphor were it generated randomly by a machine, which has no intentions, in any context at all. "All hands on deck" is synecdochic not because the First Mate intends *hands* to mean *sailors*, though he or she certainly does, but because that's what *hand* means, denotatively, in a nautical register. "The White House ordered a drone strike on Mullah Akhtar Mansoor" means what it means because we conventionally correlate salient buildings with institutions.

Metaphor, Metonymy, and Synecdoche, that is, are primarily semantic. Irony is not. Meanwhile, irony is primarily intentional. Metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche are not. However you look at it, we have Three Plus One Master Tropes, not a natural Four.

Now, like metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche, antithesis is not primarily contextual or intentional. Like metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche, antithesis is a matter of language, and is primarily semantic. If we're going to have Four Master Tropes—and, I agree with Ramus, Vico, White, Burke, and the long rhetorical tradition, that we should have Four Master Tropes—antithesis is the natural Fourth. We don't need a special equation, a plus sign to set one of them off against the others. The Four Master Tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, antithesis.

So, that's the argument. To flesh out the skeleton, I will do three things:

1. Sketch the history of this quadruplex, the Four Master Tropes.
2. Show how the rhetoricians who have propagated the quadruplex went wrong about irony.

And

3. 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

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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:

- 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 relentless 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.¹ 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.² Vico and Burke

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.) When Jakobson (1956) reduced the fundamental tropes to two,

are perhaps the most famous, and also the most idiosyncratic. 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.

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.

Irony out!

Line the Four Master Tropes up, though, and any kindergarten teacher would ask “Which one of these things not like the others?” The kids would answer in unison, “Irony!” In fact, Foucault's kindergarten teacher apparently did ask him that question. He lists only *three* master tropes—the usual suspects, minus irony (1970, 110-11; 113-4). Hugh Bredin may have had the same teacher (1992:72³); and, in general, when the Four Master Tropes shrink, irony is the first to go. Jakobson gets it down to two (metaphor and metonymy), and several late-twentieth-century projects reduce them to a single Übertrope, metaphor—especially under the influence of Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

Indeed, it's not clear irony is even a trope, let alone a Master Trope. Tropes are semantic; or, in any case, metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche are all semantic. The signification is awry. Quintilian talks about 'improper signification' (8.6.1). When you say “All hands on deck,” for instance, the relevant word 'properly signifies' an appendage at the end of a human arm, not the entity it references here, a sailor. When you say “The pen is mightier than the sword,” *pen* and *sword* more properly signify instruments for writing and fighting, not the writing and fighting themselves. When you say “Juliet is the sun,” *sun* more properly signifies a sphere of hot plasma interwoven with magnetic fields, 1,392,684 km in diameter. There are semantic mismatches, between the word and the referent.

But irony is *pragmatic*. There is no denotative anomaly. Hands cannot be summoned on deck. Pens cannot be mighty, let alone mightier than swords.

(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.

³ Bredin is somewhat tricky here. He names “four main instances, perhaps [the] only instances” of his “type of semantic figure” (effectively, tropes), substituting “symbol” for irony, with the other usual suspects, but then he conflates symbol with metaphor (Bredin 1992:74).

Astronomically large balls of flaming gas are not fourteen-year-old girls. But days can be lovely. The anomaly is between the speaker's feelings and the way they are put into language. As Quintilian puts it, irony

is understood, either from the mode of delivery, the character of the speaker, or the nature of the subject; for if any of these be at variance with the words, it is apparent that the intention is different from the expression. (8.6.54).

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); that is, to character, to ethos.

Booth and Quintilian are 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,” Wolfgang Braungart says in “Eironia Urbana” (2010: 329). A few more relevant appearances of *intention* and its variants in the long history of irony definitions:

- [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 Schematibus 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)
- the primary effect of irony is communicating to a hearer that the speaker does not mean what he/she is saying but intends the opposite meaning. ... [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: 111, 114)

Even when intention is not referenced directly, the concept is almost always just below the surface, as in Quintilian's "the character of the speaker." 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.

Scholars outside rhetoric know this as well. In a cognitive science approach to irony, *Irony in Language and Thought* (Gibbs and Colston 2007), for instance, 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.

There has been considerable experimental work with figuration over the last few decades, which rhetoricians would do well to pay attention to. Psychologists

working with irony, in particular, consistently report that understanding irony "inevitably entails using cues or signals which point to the ironic intent of the ironist" (Neshkovska 2015:1),⁴ and this result has been reinforced by work in automated figure detection. Bamman and Smith (2015), for instance, built an irony detector for tweets and found that their results were far more robust when they included data (1) on the tweeters, which they got by mining their tweet histories and their profiles, (2) on the audience, again from mining their twitter accounts, and (3) the twitter stream in which the tweet occurred, what came before it and what after it.⁵ None of this would be necessary for metaphor, metonymy, or synecdoche, of course; one simply needs information about the

⁴ Neshkovska (2015) offers a good overview of the pragmatic and psychological literature on irony.

⁵ Bamman and Smith (2015), who use the term *saracasm* for their object of inquiry (a frequent synonym of *irony* in this literature, as in ordinary language), tested each of these individual conditions alongside "purely linguistic features" (574). Any combination was significantly better than the linguistic features on their own, with the combination of all conditions (linguistic, speaker model, audience model, discourse context) being most reliable of all. But only marginally. The biggest gains by far were with the incorporation of a speaker model, something that allows for greater inference of *intention* (see Figure 1). Bamman and Smith also found that the tendency to use overt irony markers (like *#sarcasm* and *#kidding*) was proportionally related to the tweeter's unfamiliarity with the audience—that is, with people who might not know them well enough to infer their intentions.

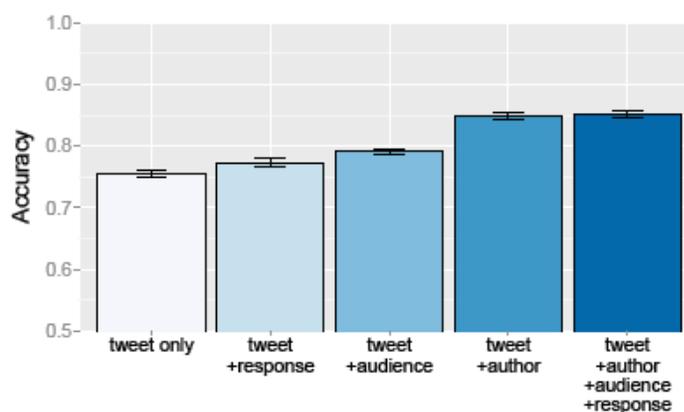


Figure 1: Accuracy of irony detection in Bamman and Smith (2015); their Figure 2, labelled "Accuracy across different feature sets, with 95% confidence intervals on the mean across 10 folds" (576)

relevant semantic domains. Even in 140 characters, as Bamman and Smith remark, irony "is a profoundly *contextual* phenomenon" (575).

If I were to take this argument further, I would get really sacrilegious and say that irony is not a trope at all, that it belongs in another categorization altogether, but I have other blasphemies to pursue, which you can probably forecast, concerning antithesis, with which I propose to replace irony, which is usually categorized as a scheme.

Antithesis in!

So, what is at the bottom of all this *Four-Master-Tropes* talk, if one of them is so distinct from the others? 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).⁶ For Talon, in the second instance, irony "shifts meanings between contraries" (Mack 148).

For Vossius, irony is manifest when, "through what is said, the opposite is understood" (1606: II, 167-168; notice the *understood*, an appeal to intention). 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*.⁷

⁶ Ramus is only the 'first instance' with respect to 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." But opposition is neither necessary nor sufficient for irony. Certainly some divergence in an opposing direction is always in play with irony, but full opposition is only present in the crudest ironies.

⁷ 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

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 antithesis, even though you may not agree with the proposition that is being presented in this form. ... [Y]ielding 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-bracketed *universal* suggests that he has in mind some order of mental principle. And there is plenty of support for such a principle.

“[T]he law of contrast,” Koffka says in *Principles of Gestalt Psychology*, naming that mental principle, 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

representing opposition. There is nothing necessarily ironic about dialectic, ordinarily understood. But there *is* something fundamentally oppositional, antithetical, about dialectic. I admit the evidence may be weak, because you can find any two, or three, or more, things combined in provocative ways in Burke, but it is worth pointing out that he associates dialectic with antithesis far more often than he associates it with irony; in particular, he regularly says such things as “under dialectical pressure ... any difference may come to be felt as an antithesis” (Burke 1973 [1941]:78)

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among Ramachandran's ten neurocognitive universal laws of art (Ramachandran and Hirstein 1999).

But there's a rub, of course: the rhetorical tradition largely treats antithesis as a scheme, not a trope. Our greatest contemporary scholar of rhetorical figures, and maybe our greatest scholar of antithesis (see Fahnestock 1999:45-85) follows this line. And the passage from Burke talks about the *form* of antithesis, not its conceptual structure.

It's not that Fahnestock and Burke don't see that antithesis has a criterial semantic aspect. They both prominently reference conceptual opposition. *Everyone* does that, in one way or another. The *Ad Herennium* says antithesis "occurs when the style is built upon contraries" ([Pseudo-]Cicero 1954 [c95 BCE]: 283). Quintilian says it "occurs when single words are opposed one to another ... or when sentences are opposed to sentences" (9.3.81). Peacham says antithesis is "a proper coupling together of contraries, and that either in words that be contrarie, or in contrarie sentences" (1954 [1597]:160).

A few more:

- [Antithesis is] founded ... on the contrast or opposition of two objects (Blair 1790.1:443)
- By antithesis is meant the comparison of different things (De Mille 1878:93)
- Antithesis is a form of expression which impresses an idea upon the mind by bringing opposites into one conception. (Hill 1887:238)
- Antithesis is a figure of speech in which things mutually opposed in some particular are set over against each other; it is founded upon the principle that opposites when brought together reflect light upon each other. (Waddy 1889;238).

And here's Fahnestock:

- [One gets an antithesis] when two parallel phrases or clauses feature words that an audience would recognize as opposites. (Fahnestock 2011:232)

We get a sense in this last definition, Fahnestock's, and in Burke's passage, where he talks about 'swinging along' with his succession of antitheses, why so many rhetoricians want to classify antithesis as a scheme. She notes that it is criterially concerned with denotation— "driven by semantic contrast" she says elsewhere (1999:58). But she wants also to make parallelism definitional, which I believe is a mistake. And she wants to prioritize that parallelism, putting antithesis in the

category of schemes. Antithesis for her is a type of parallelism that happens to involve semantic contrast; not a semantic contrast that is frequently parallel.

There is no doubt that antitheses are more effective when they are put in parallel, but that is true of many other figures as well—antimetabole, for instance—and figures very frequently travel together. If we look a bit more closely at Burke's sequence of antitheses, we see that they are largely parallel, and also that a lot else is going on:

- 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;

Parallelism is also at work here. Both the succession and the opposition, which mutually reinforce each other, are further bolstered by synchronized rhythmic repetitions. Brute lexical repetition adds another factor to the “grammatical” pull of the passage, with the three *we*'s, the three *they*'s, pivoted by the three *but*'s, and joined by two *do*'s, two *look*'s. Phonological repetition lends a hand, partially entailed by the lexical repetitions (same words, same sounds), partially augmented by the number of vowels and consonants that make repeat appearances in different words. Formal location is also important to the passage, as the repetitions, both syntactically and lexically, concentrate in certain places, mostly beginnings (of phrases or words), but also middles.⁸

Notice, also that the first of Burke's instances is *not* parallel, neither prosodically nor syntactically: "we do this, but they *on the other hand* do that." I'm perfectly willing to concede that this first instance has less formal appeal, but not that it is less antithetical, or not antithetical at all. Conceptually, it is the same as the other two. But I think Fahnestock would have to say that the first one is not antithetical, (while Burke, of course, says that it is).

I want to say that what we have here is not just a succession of antitheses, but a bundle of assonance, alliteration, epanaphora, mesodiplosis, ... and also isocolon and parison—that is, figures of prosodic (isocolon) and syntactic (parison) parallelism—rather than ascribing that parallelism to the presence of antitheses. Or, take another famous example:

⁸ The foregoing is lifted almost verbatim from Harris (2013:.

And so, my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country. (Kennedy [& Sorensen] 1961a)

This is almost always called simply an "antimetabole" (or "chiasmus," or "reversible raincoat," depending on your terminology, but only one thing). Yet, it clearly contains mesodiplosis ("can do for"), as antimetaboles so often do, and which at least some people make criterial (Hromada 2011). More importantly, it contains an antithesis, the contrary propositions "Ask not ..." and "Ask ..."

A definition of antithesis that was bound to parallelism, to prosodic parallelism in particular, would exclude this example. But clearly the fact that it contains two contrary sentences is absolutely fundamental to the way it epitomizes Kennedy's argument. It does so, not just as an antimetabole, but as an *antithetical* antimetabole.

My point is, we should simply identify antithesis as semantic contrast and note that it often co occurs with isocolon and/or parison.

If one is prepared to make that move, to say that antithesis criterially rests on semantic contrast, either of sentence or of word, and that it often co occurs with figures of parallelism, then antithesis is a trope. It is, in fact, the fourth Master Trope. I'm making that move. I want you to make it as well.

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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