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## Commentary on Van Belle

Christopher W. Tindale

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# Commentary on Hilde van Belle's "Playing with Oppositions. Verbal and visual antithesis in the media".

CHRISTOPHER W. TINDALE

*Department of Philosophy  
University of Windsor  
Ontario  
Canada  
ctindale@uwindsor.ca*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With so much attention given in contemporary discussions to argumentation schemes, and especially their possible roots in Aristotle's theory of the *topoi*, it is refreshing to see an account and analysis that shifts attention to the figures and their contemporary role in practical argumentation. This is true not only because they also can be traced to the same Aristotelian source, but because their contributions to understanding argumentative strategies have been largely ignored.

Following Fahnestock (2000), Professor van Belle traces her understanding of the key figure of *antithesis* to the fledgling account put forward by Aristotle in the third book of the *Rhetoric*, where it represents the figures of speech in the same way that metaphor is the paradigm semantic trope and *energeia* the paradigm figure of thought. In these remarks, I want first to offer some comments on the ancient understanding of *antithesis* and then consider the role of this figure in the media, especially as it is demonstrated in the key case discussed here.

## 2. ANCIENT ACCOUNTS OF ANITHESIS

The central question that arises for me when I refer the extant material is whether *antithesis* is a figure that is supposed to present oppositions or merely one that provides contrasts, and what hinges on such a distinction. This is an important question given the analyses of some of the examples in this paper. It is the case that many commentators treat *antithesis* as if it fits simply into the tradition of anti-*logoi* (opposing arguments). Michael Mendelson's (2002) study of Protagoras is a case in point, and Fahnestock is quoted as noting that "Aristotle's antithesis is "a verbal structure that places contrasted or opposed terms in parallel or balanced cola or phrases" (1999, p. 46). Thus, semantic opposites (good/bad; friends/enemies) are used in contrastive ways to build an argument.

Diogenes Laertius wrote of Protagoras that he was the first to claim that "on every issue there are two *logoi* opposed to each other" (Diels and Kranz [DK] 80 A1), and variants of this two-*logoi* claim are provided by Clement of Alexandria, "Every argument has an opposite argument," and Seneca, "one can argue equally well on either side of any

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question” (*DK* 80 A20). Commentators differ on how to interpret this strategy and the purposes behind it. But it suffices for us that it need not commit the user to the *figure* of antithesis. That figure, as the present paper makes clear, is characterized by its structure, the setting of phrases in cola (I am loved by the gods, you...). Such figures can (and often do) contain oppositions, but these are not necessary to them. The distinction of note here is between the syntactical structure of the figure, where the cola set the terms in contrast, and the *content* of the figure, which may happen to involve opposites. Aristotle himself seems more ambivalent about the use of opposites. Early in the *Rhetoric*, he raises concerns about arguing on opposing sides on any issue (*Rhet.* I.1.12.), while several of the *topoi* in Chapter 23 of Book II address the contrasting of opposites. *Topos* 14 explicitly contrasts opposites like engaging in public debate and not engaging in public debate, which Aristotle clearly sees as involving a dilemma. *Topos* 18 involves contrasting choices, “when we were in exile, we fought to come home; now at home, we go into exile in order not to fight”. The difficulty in understanding the difference between these two *topoi* is indicative of understanding the *topoi* generally, since the contrast between engaging in public debate or not also involves a choice. And again, *topos* 22 involves refutations involving contradiction, and at the end of the chapter Aristotle notes that “Refutative enthymemes are better liked [by audiences] than demonstrative ones because the refutative enthymeme is a bringing together of opposites in brief form, and when these are set side by side they are clearer to the hearer” (*Rhet.* 2.23.30). But in his actual discussion of *antithesis* in Book III, Aristotle mixes opposites with contraries in a range of examples (Chapter 8, 7). “Such a style,” he then writes,

is pleasing because opposites are most knowable and more knowable when put beside each other and because they are like a syllogism, for refutation (*elenkos*) is a bringing together of contraries” (III.8.8).

But none of this commits the figure to exclusively using opposites such that we can reverse the relationship and infer that wherever we have opposites, we have the figure.

The reading of the remarks in Books II and III speaks to van Belle’s understanding of the Aristotelian usage involving the testing of a position. When points are set in contrast, whether oppositions or otherwise, they provide the audience with material by which to consider a case and decide for themselves.

This fits also with the pre-Aristotelian tradition of the *antithesis*, a tradition that was rich with the uses of this figure. Gorgias (as Kennedy explains in his notes to Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, p. 217) was a noted employer of the strategy, and Thucydides makes famous use of it in his depiction of the Mytilenean debate, when the Athenians had to decide whether to follow through on an earlier decision to kill the citizens of Mytilene or pursue a more merciful path. Thucydides presents the two principal debaters and their arguments, setting these out in clear *antitheses*.

Then there is Prodicus’ ‘Choice of Heracles’ (or ‘Heracles at the Crossroads’), preserved for us courtesy of Xenophon. The young Heracles is at a point where he must decide what course his life should pursue when he is approached by two women representing Vice and Virtue, each of whom argues to be chosen. Vice gives a brief appeal for the life of pleasure without effort (*DK* 84 B2, 23-26); Virtue then counters with overtures that do not promise pleasure (27-28); Vice interrupts in order to make clear just what a contrast this is to what she had promised (29); and then Virtue completes

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the discourse, now addressing Vice, and providing a longer series of *antitheses* to show the contrast between them (30-33), before she turns to Heracles with her conclusion. The *antitheses* are particularly emphatic, as in “you [Vice] have been denied the company of the gods...I, on the other hand, am a companion of the gods” (31-32). Like the Mytilenean debate, the intent of the use of the argumentation here seems to be to set out as clearly as possible the alternative positions in order for a choice to be made.

From these few examples, and the (ambiguous) Aristotelian position reviewed previously, I would judge a core purpose of *antitheses* in *argumentative* situations (and both the pre- and Aristotelian traditions deal with a wealth of non-argumentative situations), to be assisting the audience in testing or weighing a case. By setting out contrasting elements within a position, the author sets before the audience a full range of possibilities from which they (and the author) might choose. This is a richly rhetorical enterprise that gives autonomy to the audience.

### 3. THE PURPOSE AND VALUE OF *ANTITHESIS*

In her broad discussion of *antithesis*, Professor van Belle suggests several other purposes for use of the figure beyond testing or weighing a case. One key purpose, for example, is expectation. Indeed, the syntax supports this. But what value does it have? It creates a certain communion between arguer and audience, bringing them together, to the same ‘place’ of thought. This fits the roots of the rhetorical enthymeme, which means literally ‘in the mind’. The figure in question invites the minds of the participants to think in the same terms. It also provides for a more active audience, since in completing the figure for themselves they ‘see’ rather than just being told.

Another suggested purpose is interpretation. This comes through in the visual example of the Macbeth poster. Setting in contrast conflicting images of the central character wedded in a single image (this is important), the poster draws the audience into the meaning of the play and provides a particular perspective on it. This invites discussion and evaluation from the audience. It would be important here that the figure of *antithesis* is not used to fix the meaning, which would be contrary to the original spirit of the figure’s employment. Rather, it opens up perspectives and questions. As Professor van Belle notes, the younger and older Macbeth create a puzzle that can be queried and pursued. So there is pedagogic value in this particular usage.

But these possible purposes also raise the difficulty of how to interpret the use of *visual antitheses*, which play an important role in this paper. The Macbeth poster fits the purpose of interpretation, as shown. But it is more difficult to see it working in the traditional sense of expectation. How, for example, would the first ‘colon’ of the poster lead an audience to expect the second? This just does not seem to work in the way that verbal cola do.

### 4. INTERPRETING ‘*ANTITHESIS*’ IN THE AIT OUD CASE

The first thing I would note about this central case is that it seems far more a case of the anti-*logoi* (opposing arguments) strategy noted above usually rhetorically effective features, than the employment of clear *antitheses* with identifiable cola that work on the basis of expectation. While the title (‘Fibres talk; Ait Oud is silent’) gives us balanced

cola, the article itself proceeds in terms of opposing arguments on the central issue of the accused's guilt. The illustration again seems stretched to provide a visual *antithesis*. It does create a pair as claimed; but not an *antithesis* from which we expect one colon having seen the other. While it does work as a sub-argument, it does so for the larger issue of Ait Oud's guilt. In like fashion, the second article presents opposing arguments (rather than clear cola) and serves more to make the rhetorically interesting move of attacking the expert's *ethos*, as van Belle suggests.

Still, if we accept for the purposes of discussion that we have *antitheses* at work here in the two articles and illustration, we should then ask what the purpose and value are of employing the figure of *antithesis* visually or verbally. In fact, the core reading of the Ait Oud case is the second one, and that's where trying to work out the *antitheses* involved leads Professor van Belle into difficulties. It is true, as she notes, that the core of the case is the guilt versus innocence/fibres versus accused. But, as she also notes, the relation between the cola is not clear at all. The best interpretation (if interpretation is the purpose, and using the 'testing of a position' proposal) is that which suggests Ait Oud's silence is a confession of guilt. But this is the least workable interpretation in the context and given the second article in which Ait Oud's strategy of attacking the expert-*ethos* contradicts such a reading. Hence, the paradox that ensues.

In the end, it is suggested, the resort to *antithesis* does not construct the kind of opposition that closes the case; it leaves it open. The introduction of doubt arises from, I would suggest, the strong anti-*logoi*. Still, we do have a result, where the various tools employed on the page, verbal and visual, appear to have the purpose of stimulating public debate, as Professor van Belle concludes. As a strategy of *antithesis* (although this works also for the anti-*logoi* reading), the primary purpose noted earlier of inviting an audience to weigh the merits of a case comes to the fore. The argumentation is invitational, inviting the audience to consider the case and the claims made on both sides and decide for itself.

## 5. CONCLUSION

One of the more negative judgments of rhetoric generally is that it involves no more than attempting to persuade an audience and may use any means to do so. But if a key value (and even purpose) of a figure like *antithesis* is to invite an audience to test a case, or weigh the contrasting possibilities involved, then we not only have a more constructive element of rhetoric, but one that flies in the face of the traditional dismissal. It is true that Aristotle's discussion of *antithesis* technically arises within a treatment of rhetoric that defines it in terms of the "available means of persuasion" (*Rhet.* I.1.14). But even on that understanding, the sense of persuasion can be seen as a 'personal' one: an active audience uses the materials presented in antithetical form to review the case and persuade themselves.

Professor van Belle is to be commended for bringing the importance and value of figures in argumentative contexts to our attention in this way. The ambitions of the project seem largely successful; some of the details perhaps less so.

[Link to paper](#)

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