

Through A Shakespearean Lens: Mimesis, Tyrannicide and the Subversion of Roman Pietas in M.L. Rio's *If We Were Villains*

Artistic imitation of a role, defined by Plato as mimesis, was understood to have a deeply psychological and transformative sort of impact on the performer (Plato, *Republic*, book III, translation by Benjamin Jowett). The idea that performing violence must make real violence inevitable. M.L. Rio's novel *If We Were Villains* portrays the concept of mimesis through a Shakespearean lens, whereby her characters are forced into rigid theatrical archetypes. Through consistent rehearsal, across varying Shakespearean plays, this mimesis causes the boundaries between the stage and reality to blur. The ancient world is delivered to the characters of the novel through William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the play providing the students with a perfectly romanticised perception of tyrannicide, the collective and ritualistic execution of a tyrant for the greater good. When a character's personality beyond the stage begins to mirror that of their violent theatrical performance, the group is conditioned to view his eventual murder not as a crime, but as a necessary decision for the greater good. The Roman virtue of pietas, a duty to our country or family (Cicero, *De Inventione*), becomes relevant as the characters attempt to utilise this concept to justify their actions throughout the story. Within this essay, I aim to explore classical concepts, and their reception throughout the contemporary novel *If we were villains*, by M.L. Rio, and the ways in which this author utilises Shakespeare to critique the romanticisation of classical antiquity.

M.L. Rio's novel *If We Were Villains* begins in 2007, with the narrator Oliver Marks, in prison after serving ten years for the murder of his classmate, Richard Stirling. Detective Colborne, who had investigated the case originally, visits Oliver in hopes of discovering the truth on as to what had happened a decade before (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 8). Oliver begins to recount the story, and we are transported back to 1997, while Oliver was a fourth-year drama student at Dellecher Classical Conservatory, a prestigious art school. There were seven fourth year students living in a dorm fondly known of as the castle, these are the central characters of the novel (Richard, Oliver, James, Meredith, Alexander, Wren, Filippa). This essay will have more of a focus on the characters Richard, Oliver, and James, and the ways in which their character archetypes led to the outcome of the novel.

Mimesis, Character Archetypes, The Blur of Role vs Reality, Pietas

In the beginning of their fourth year, the characters are cast as their roles for Dellecher's production of *Julius Caesar*. Richard is unsurprisingly cast as Julius Caesar, but as he rehearses this role, violence gradually begins to seep from his theatrical performance into his real life, his bullying only continuing to escalate. (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, Act II, spread across many pages.) He shares the same tyrannical arrogance with Caesar that antiquity demanded be punished. It becomes increasingly apparent that Rio's characters do not simply act or memorise lines, they all begin to internalise the roles they are assigned and experience a literal form of *mimesis* whereby the boundaries between Roman history, Shakespearean performance, and their modern realities completely collapse, blending into

one. The dynamic of Richard playing the tyrannical, doomed ruler and James playing his conflicted friend and eventual assassin sets the stage for the betrayal and violence that eventually bleeds from the stage performance into their reality, upon Richard's death.

In Ancient Greek and Roman thought, characters do not have free will, but are instead bound by fate. In Rio's novel, Gwendolyn (one of Dellecher's acting instructors) and the faculty itself, may act as a metaphor for classical fatalism. Those responsible for the casting of the seven students consistently assign rigid and unchanging character archetypes to each of them, implying that they are destined to play these roles on stage and off stage. Due to the students spending years intensely imitating their assigned archetypes on stage, these archetypes eventually begin to overpower their real-world personalities and morals. This concept is seen through Richard being permanently cast as the more dominant figure, he completely embodies this, and so when the other students acting begin to shift, his real-world behaviour shifts to something abusive.

The exact moment that we see the character's onstage theatrical roles collide with who they are off stage takes place during an initially innocent and drunken game following their production of *Macbeth* on Halloween. James had been cast as Macbeth, pushing Richard into a lesser role than what he was used to. This is where Richard begins unknowingly identifying himself with his role as Julius Caesar, whose fatal flaw was his insatiable desire for complete dominance, hubris, as reinforced by quotes from *Julius Caesar* such as "But I am as constant as the northern star... that unassailable holds on his rank, unshak'd of motion: and that I am he" whereby Caesar declares himself as above ordinary men. (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act III, Scene 1) In the lake, Oliver had Meredith on his shoulders, and the pair were attempting to topple Filippa over, who was on Alexander's shoulders. The atmosphere was light and playful until the moment James is about to join in, Richard, who had been sulking throughout the night and had gotten himself heavily intoxicated, intervenes, and the tension steadily builds as Richard repeatedly attempts to put an end to their game. Richard's breaking point appears to be when Meredith snaps back "You can't stand to see us have a good time because you're busy pouting? Because you didn't get the last bow for once?" and "his face went white, livid." (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 78) Richard wades into the water, towards James, repeating that he wants to play too while shoving James over. The two begin to fight, but Richard clearly had the upper hand, being far bigger. He holds James underwater despite the group desperately screaming at him to let go. (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 80) With a combined group effort, they all manage to pry him off James, who bursts through the surface with a gasp, coughing up water and bile. Prior to this moment, James was playing noble and heroic characters without having experienced real-world violence, however, being subjected to Richard's near fatal aggression significantly alters him as a person. Oliver says that "Something changed irrevocably, in those few dark minutes James was submerged, as if the lack of oxygen had caused all our molecules to rearrange." (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 83)

This could be said to be the moment where James' role as Brutus begins to seep into his real life, in *Julius Caesar*, Brutus does not seek violence out of malice but instead is pushed towards it because he truly believes that Caesar poses a threat to Rome, the group's

equivalent to Rome being each other. Like Brutus, here may be where James internalises the idea that the tyrant must be killed for the greater good. Richard's aggression continues to escalate after this incident. "I seized both his wrists and pulled him toward me... Bruises in raw, vivid blue spotted the undersides of his arms, all the way up to his elbows." (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 97) This quotation comes from the moment in *If We Were Villains* where James confides in Oliver, sharing what Richard (playing Caesar) had been doing to him during the rehearsals of the assassination scene in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, when Brutus (James) stabs him the last time and is grabbed. Oliver desperately begs James to let him tell someone what's happening, but James ultimately refuses, too deeply absorbed in his character's archetype.

James embodies the Ancient Roman idea of *pietas*, believing he has an obligation of duty and loyalty to the group and working to live up to this. Rio utilises this to emphasise the dangers of a modern human attempting to live up to this ancient standard of moral virtue, as it proves to be detrimental to human psychology, evidenced by James' psychological collapse later in the novel. Being cast as Brutus, he is made by Dellecher's faculty to embody this role of leadership and honour. In true Roman History and then in Shakespeare's adaptation, Brutus' defining trait does seem to be his loyalty to Rome, James inevitably internalises this through theatrical mimesis and learns to believe it is his *pietas* to the group to carry the burden and protect them from external threat.

The Romantic, Shakespearean Lens

The cast were all completely enamoured with the romanticisation of tragedy through the way Shakespeare tells it. Linguistic possession is evident, they speak in verse to one another often, as if distancing themselves from their actions by hiding behind the role of another figure. The characters within this novel do not study Rome directly, but instead interact with a heavily romanticised, highly theatrical version of Rome that Shakespeare provides to them, providing reasoning as to why they're so in love with the ideas. They take Shakespeare's dramatized lines entirely literally, even if subconsciously, they are so obsessed with the portrayal of the play that they inevitably act out a murder that mirrors a Roman political betrayal in their real modern lives. "We spent four years, and most of us years before that, immersed in Shakespeare. Submerged. Here we could indulge in our collective obsession. We spoke it as a second language, conversed in poetry, and lost touch with reality a little." (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 246)

The Lake, Tyrannicide

"Richard floated on his back, neck twisted unnaturally, mouth gaping, face frozen in a Greek mask of agony. Blood crawled dark and sticky across his face from the crush of tissue and

bone that used to be an eye socket, a cheekbone now cracked and broken open like an eggshell.” (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 141)

The morning after Richard’s murder, Alexander brings the group to the dock where Richard’s body was floating, half dead, after having discovered him during a smoke break. The characters are gathered numb and silent on the dock, a terrible stillness among them. The scene stays frozen, until Richard turned with a soft groan, and stretched one hand feebly toward them. James is quick to exhibit horror at this revelation and runs toward the end of the dock, until Oliver tackles him to prevent him from reaching Richard. Rather than springing to action in an attempt to help Richard the way James had, the group collectively begin to rationalise this turn of events, trying to piece together how this could have happened. As James repeatedly urges the group to help Richard, Alexander speaks up “..right now you need to stop and ask yourself if that’s really what’s best for everyone... do you not remember what he’s been like the last few weeks? Clobbering us onstage, we’re covered in bruises, he nearly drowned you on Halloween..” (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 149) The group individually reflects on their initial thoughts when they thought Richard was dead, Oliver’s narration confirms to us that he was relieved. Upon Alexander’s suggestion to let him die, nobody offers any protest, they all collectively agree not to act, all of them playing a passive role in Richard’s murder. (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 147-155) This scene at the lake can be compared to the senate floor within Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, as everyone contributes to the death of Caesar in their own way. (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 3, Scene 1) In Plutarch’s ‘Life of Caesar’, it is emphasised that Caesar’s assassination was a collective ritual whereby every senator had to participate so that the guilt was shared equally. In ‘Life of Brutus’, Brutus justifies the assassination not as a personal vendetta, but as a necessary civic duty to cure Rome of a tyrant, this ties in as the group had viewed Richard’s increasing violence as a threat to their safety and so decided that his death would protect them all. The students use the classical rationale of tyrannicide to justify their inaction at the dock, convinced that letting Richard drown is a ritualistic removal of a tyrant and not a murder. Plutarch emphasises that Caesar was surrounded during the assassination, and so the group in the novel standing closely on the dock, paralysed in a shared silence and inaction, mirrors this sort of scene. Upon seeing Brutus pull a dagger, Caesar had stopped resisting, as seen through the lines “[They stab Caesar. Casca strikes the first, Brutus the last blow] Caesar: ‘Et tu, Brute? Then fall Caesar!’”, this is like the way Richard, half dead, looks up at the group and realises nobody will save him. (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 147), (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act III, Scene 1) The tragedy in both is not the deaths themselves, but the weight of betrayal.

The psychological impact and the collapse

In the Ancient world, Brutus exhibits a concept known as *constantia* (Cicero, *De Officiis*) upon executing the tyrant for the greater good of Rome, a display of stoicism and continuous pride regarding the sacrifice made for the republic (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 4, scene 3, an example being the moment Brutus faces Caesar’s ghost). James’ character in M.L Rio’s

novel slowly unravels following the events after murdering Richard, while trying to maintain this ancient standard of detachment, but inevitably suffering psychologically as a result of his actions. James being cast as Brutus pushes him toward the belief that he must bear the responsibility for the group's safety. Brutus' line "Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more" (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 3 Scene 2) becomes relevant here as it perfectly encapsulates James' conditioned mindset, influenced through theatrical mimesis and his character archetype. James chooses his duty to the group, his Rome, over what he knows to be lawful and moral. When James makes the choice to strike Richard with the boathook, he is killing this metaphorical Caesar, which could be interpreted as his morality and innocence. Therefore, James demonstrates the classical concept *pietas*, sacrificing private love for public safety as Brutus does. Despite this, the reality is that James is not Brutus, and he becomes hollowed out by guilt that continues to build up, significantly emphasised when Oliver lies to the police and takes the fall for the murder, driving James to suicide by drowning.

Oliver also spirals following the death of Richard, though Rio portrays the impact on Oliver through a collapse of his established character archetype as a sidekick or passive bystander. In Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the character of Octavius does not participate in the conspiracy at all and so is not weighed down by guilt. He steps into power as the main heroes of the story all destroyed themselves (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 5, Scene 5). In *If We Were Villains*, M.L. Rio takes this concept of detachment and calculation, and deconstructs the role entirely, fitting it to Oliver in a way that accounts for his own psychological spiral and his utter devotion to James. After Richard's death, an act that Oliver did not commit, he is launched directly into the crime anyway. Oliver's parents had told him they would not be paying his tuition for his fourth year at Dellecher due to one of his two sisters struggling with an eating disorder, as they needed to use those funds to get her professional support. As a result of this, Oliver seeks financial aid from Dellecher and is assigned numerous cleaning jobs across the accommodation, and while cleaning the fireplace he discovers a scrap of fabric stained with blood, which he keeps to his person and hides. (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 250) Oliver is also required to fabricate alibis with the group as they had decided to disguise the fact that they had discovered his body. This provides evidence that Oliver's mimesis had broken down, and that he could no longer play the role of an innocent bystander but instead participates in the cover up and the tyrannicide.

Oliver was codependently devoted to James, confirming near the end of the novel that he was in love with him (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 348), which meant that Oliver carried James' guilt and trauma as if it were his own, before Oliver was even aware that it was James who had killed Richard. In Roman history and in Shakespeare's play, Caesar's killers are haunted by the ghost of Caesar (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, Act 4, Scene 3 and Act 5)). The ghost of Caesar manifests as James' overwhelming guilt, slowly destroying him. Oliver recognises James' failure to maintain the Roman idea of *constantia*, it could be said that Oliver does this for him. This is reinforced by Oliver's thoughts "I still saw Richard sometimes, almost nightly, more often than not in the undercroft. Blood leaked out from underneath the locker door, and when I opened it, I found him crushed inside, red dripping from his nose and eyes and mouth." (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 302)

Oliver, while cleaning his and James' room, discovers the bloody boathook inside Richard's mattress. During the intermission of their production of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Oliver confronts James, demanding to know the truth of what happened that night. (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 327) James recounts the events, speaking of Richard's uncontrollable rage, describing it as watching a star explode. He had gone to follow Richard, who began taunting him the same as he had done on Halloween night when he had nearly drowned James. After being shoved against the doors of the boathouse, he grabbed the nearest object he could, which turned out to be the boathook. Unable to shake the thought of "who would keep him from drowning me this time?" (Rio, *If We Were Villains*, 2017, p. 330), combined with his perceived duty to protect the rest of the group, he followed through with the blow. Oliver makes the decision to confess to the murder and spend 10 years in prison to save James; this is exactly where Oliver combats the historical destiny of his assigned archetype. Historically, Octavius lets Brutus die and comes into power, choosing Rome and his personal desires over any personal relationship. Oliver completely rejects this for his own form of personal pietas, his devotion to and adoration for James.

Conclusion

M.L. Rio portrays how the rigid archetypes of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* led to the psychological collapse of the novel's cast. James collapses under the weight of living up the standards of a stoic, heroic Brutus, Richard grew violent and aggressive as a blur between the stage and his real-life was established, Caesar's tyranny bleeding into his personality. Oliver, however, abandons the notions that he should maintain his passive role, and instead chooses devotion over the idea of Roman civic law.

This novel establishes the incompatibility of Ancient ethics and modern human psychology, and how attempting to blend the two became disastrous. The Ancient Romans glorified the suppression of personal emotion for pietas and constantia, James and Oliver's sacrifice and unravelling serve as a direct example as to why complex human emotion cannot be neatly contained the way ancient expectations were.

In conclusion, M.L. Rio uses Shakespeare as a lens to expose a dangerous truth within her contemporary novel, that being when modern people romanticise the harsh realities of classical antiquity, they will inevitably destroy themselves psychologically. This novel is part of the genre 'dark academia', yet actively critiques the theme, emphasising the dangers of obsession with the aesthetics of the ancient world. M.L. Rio's novel perfectly expresses how viewing Greek and Roman literature as elite and picturesque, without also acknowledging the reality that classical antiquity was inherently brutal and violent, can have negative consequence. By blurring these lines between playing a role (mimesis), and truly living it, the characters romanticised a horrific crime, viewing it as a poetic tragedy rather than the violent act it was. The tragedy of the novel was not the murder of a classmate, but it's more so a lesson in the dangers of classical reception. The characters observed these concepts through Shakespeare's words, the words they were infatuated with, and so tried to force themselves into the roles of the characters they acted as, only to learn that the reality is unforgiving.

“Do you blame Shakespeare for any of it?”

The question is so nonsensical coming from such a sensible man, that I can’t suppress a smile.

‘I blame him for all of it,’ I say”

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