

Submission for Raven Foundation Essay Contest 2009 by Tony Bartlett

DISSING OR KISSING

A Play in One Act by Anthony W. Bartlett

With afterword by "Rene Girard."

Dramatis personae: *Maisy* in scruffy jeans and T, *Kaylee* and *Nina* fashionable jeans and tops, *Tracy* black mini-skirt, black leather jacket. *Kaylee* is an RMG (really mean girl), *Nina* her sidekick, *Maisy* a survivor with a streak of genius, *Tracy* a shipwreck.

A school hallway beside Maisy's locker. She is just beginning to close it as Kaylee and Nina arrive on either side of her. She tries to shut it quickly, hand over her head, as she turns defensively.

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Kaylee: Hey Crazy Maisy, where were you? Why weren't you at the study group last night? We got absolutely nothing done, gossiping! You should have been there!

Nina: O, totally, you should have been there!

Maisy (doing finger quotes): Kaylee and Nina, just "gossiping"? I *know* you were talking about me. Not even trashing Tracy would be more fun than laughing at me. But didn't you get the assignment done, the choose-a-movie-thing? It's due today and you really owe me all the other times I helped you.

Kaylee: Naah, we knew you'd have it covered. You always do. Sooooo, have you?

Maisy: I can't believe it! I've done your assignments all year, and just one time for something as simple as describing a movie you can't do it. I *told* you I was visiting Mom last night and couldn't come.

Kaylee and Nina tower over her menacingly.

Kaylee: Well, that's too bad isn't it, Miss Smarty Pants. You know what we did last time you didn't come through for us?

Nina: Yeah, Miss Smarty Pants, you should *know* not to let us down.

Maisy: How could I forget? I was called crazy and a fashion disaster, and my face got pushed in the mud. No one would sit next to me at lunch. It was like I had a communicable disease.

Kaylee: That's right, but I'm sure we can think of something even more entertaining! (*She reaches into the locker behind Maisy, grabbing a coat to throw on the floor.*)

Maisy (*clutching for the coat*): No, no, please don't. You're right. I'll come up with something. (*Then inspired.*) You know what? I watched a movie last night with my Mom and I could do that, and get something written up during biology...

Kaylee: (*Putting the coat back and relaxing, but only a bit.*) That's more like it, but we might beat you up anyway just for getting out of line.

Maisy: No, no, you'll love this movie. You'll be really happy with it!

Kaylee (*Somewhat interested*): Ok, what movie was it?

Maisy: It's *Never Been Kissed* with Drew Barrymore.

Kaylee (*Smug*): Oh yes, I saw that. It's got that scene at the end when she waits in the middle of the baseball field with the bleachers full of people and she's said in the newspaper that she wants this guy to kiss her and how she's never been kissed, and she's just standing there waiting. She's kind of a goof, like you. I can see why you were watching it.

Maisy (*defensively*): Well, my Mom likes her, ever since she was the little girl in *E.T.* But you're right, she is goofy in this movie. (*Then enthusiastic*) But she's also a writer and a newspaper reporter and she gets the job to go undercover as a student in her old high school. (*Suddenly realizing*) And wasn't our assignment to describe a movie about someone pretending to be someone else, like in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*?

Kaylee: Dunno, that's why we got you on the job.

Nina: No, she's right, that's what we were told to do.

Kaylee: *Whatever*, Nina! Just let her get on with it.

Maisy: Sure, I'll do it. But we have to present together so we should know what we're going to say.

Nina: Yeah, I never saw the movie so go on, tell me about it.

Maisy: Well, the girl is called Josie, and her nickname at high school was "Josie-Grossie" because she was such a loser. Then when she goes back undercover she starts right back at being a loser again and is laughed at by the cool girls.

Kaylee: Once a loser always a loser!

Nina: Yeah, but Drew Barrymore's a star, she must have won out in the end, right?

Maisy: Well, that's the fun thing. Her younger brother, Rob, who was a great baseball player and very popular, he decides to go undercover himself. He goes to the same school with Josie, and nobody knows they are related. He starts telling everyone how *really cool* she is until, well, everyone believes it! She gets to join the gang of the popular girls, and then the totally hot boy at school, a kid called Guy, falls for her and asks her to the prom!

Nina (*spontaneously*): Wow! That's kinda like what we were reading in *Twelfth Night* with Olivia falling for Viola who is undercover!

Kaylee (*provoked*): Whaat? It's nothing like it! Olivia's a girl and Guy's a boy, but Viola's pretending to be a boy and that's how Olivia falls for her. It's just *sex*. Guy falls for Josie because of what Rob *said*, about her being cool, *not* sex. I know that much!

Maisy: No, no, I think Nina's got something and Nina you should say it at the presentation! I think the reason Olivia falls for Viola is because Viola's carrying messages of love from Duke Orsino and does it really well because she's secretly in love with the Duke herself. She shows no concern or desire for Olivia, so Olivia gets turned on by Viola's mysterious desire for the Duke, and she wants it for herself!

Nina: Ohh, I get it. Like when I was a freshman and I wanted to get Rick Burrows to ask me out—*eeeeuw*, what was I thinking!—anyway I made up stories about a summer boyfriend and he suddenly got all interested!

Maisy: Exactly, and that's got to be the same thing that happened in the movie to Guy. He gets turned on by all the other students who say Josie is hot, and he doesn't know it either. The undercover thing is just a device to show desire at work: in every case people are copying the power of someone's desire, without knowing it. Have you noticed how Olivia's name is kind of the mirror image of Viola's?

Kaylee (*Mean*): Well, we call *you* Crazy Maisy, because you make no sense whatsoever to anyone apart perhaps yourself, and I'm not even sure about that. (*Then abruptly changing to businesslike*) Well that's it, we're done? That's what we're all going to say about the movie?

Maisy: No, actually, I'm on a roll! There's the whole thing about being kissed...

Nina (*Interested*): Go on, Maisy, tell us. (*Kaylee rolls her eyes but let's her continue.*)

Maisy: Well, ok. Josie really was a wipeout when she was a teenager. The other kids played horrible tricks on her. The worst was when they got the really hot boy of her own time at high school to pretend he was going to take her to the prom. When he arrived in the limo he stood up and threw eggs at her in her prom dress. It was so mean.

Nina: You know even that is like *Twelfth Night*, with Sir Andrew being set up to think Olivia loved him and then finding out he'd been made a total fool!

Maisy: Absolutely! It's either everyone picks on you or you're made the prom queen! 'Cause that's what happened to Josie at the end, she's made the prom queen. It's like everyone is either hating you or wanting you, and without much difference between the two. In that final scene in the baseball stadium it's a fairytale ending when the teacher who fell in love with her, but didn't know she was old enough to hit on, he comes along and kisses her. The whole world just goes crazy. It's like they all want her to get that big, big kiss. And when she gets it she is just, well, a total movie goddess!

Nina: You could say it's either dissing or kissing, couldn't you? It makes me think about you, Maisy, perhaps you'll end up prom queen!

Kaylee (*Aghast*): "Not while I'm in this school..." (*But she trails off, her attention grabbed by a fourth person who comes on stage at that moment. It's Tracy, ashen face, multiple piercings and tattoos, cigarette in hand. She doesn't look anyone in the eye. Kaylee speaks directly at her.*) Oh no, it's Trashy Tracy...

Tracy (*mumbling*): Hello.

Nina: Look at the state of her!

Maisy: You know, Tracy, you're not really wanted here; can't you see we're working?

Then all three other girls turn toward her and in unison shout: Get lost, Tracy!

Curtain

The play functions as a play within a play within a play. Like Chinese dolls it shows that as you reach down through the levels from *Twelfth Night* through *Never Been Kissed* to *Dissing or Kissing* you are touching on the same core nerve of human structure or anthropological principle. The high priests of metaphysics tell us that human beings derive their meaning via intellectual truths sent down from heaven. The great dramatic artists, from the Greeks through Shakespeare, and now even in Hollywood, they know better. They point again and again to imitative desire—what I call mimetic desire, or simply mimesis—as the driving force of human relationship, and the organizing principle of human culture as a structural whole. Desire is chaotic until it finds both someone to pick on and/or someone to worship.

We see Olivia copying Viola's desire and the whole school copying Rob's, and Nina copying Kaylee. And in this frenzy of desire and rivalry there is always the need for a group victim or scapegoat who can bring everybody together. In *Twelfth Night* there is Sir Andrew, in *Never Been Kissed* there is Josie and in *Dissing or Kissing* there is Maisy to begin with, but then finally it's Tracy. On the other side Josie ends up a goddess as *Dissing or Kissing* says, and this is very important. The very recognizability of the scenario obscures its fundamental importance.

I call it double transference. The victim and the god are just two phases of the same fundamental process. Our human ancestors experienced exactly the same emotions and in primary scenes of great intensity they killed one of their own, creating the original victim. But the killing of this individual brought sudden amazing peace and so, in the next moment, the victim was called a god. Modern stories often split up the functions or phases into different people, "heroes" and "villains," that kind of thing. But a movie like *Never Been Kissed* comes very close to showing they are just two different moments of the same thing, the dangerous and arbitrary flux of desire.

Dissing or Kissing adds a further piece to the puzzle because it also hints strongly how the role of the scapegoat fluxes so easily from one person to another; in this case from Maisy to Tracy. The whole structure today is very unstable and is what I call sacrificial crisis, a situation where there is never any final victim and/or god. No group perhaps is more vulnerable to this crisis than teenagers. I think it would be a huge benefit to schools to provide courses in mimetic theory, and also create perhaps conflict resolution groups using the theory, seeking positive forms of imitation to overcome the crisis.

“Rene Girard” (or one who speaks in his name)