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*The Pre-Oedipalizing of Klein in (North) America: Ridley Scott's Alien Re-analyzed*

by Donald Carveth and Naomi Gold

When analysts trained in Freudian ego psychology seek to assimilate Kleinian theory they often preoedipalize it, conflating the pregenital with the preoedipal. The use of Kleinian theory by Glen and Krin Gabbard in their applied psychoanalysis of Ridley Scott's film *Alien* illustrates this pattern. While illuminating other elements of the paranoid-schizoid dynamics so vividly portrayed in the film, their analysis overlooks the theme of sibling oedipal conflict conspicuously indicated in the name of the film's central character, Kane.

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**keywords:** Melanie Klein; Glen Gabbard; Krin Gabbard; Ridley Scott; *Alien*; pre-oedipal; pregenital; cinema; paranoid-schizoid position; depressive position; sibling rivalry; Oedipus complex.

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***The Pre-Oedipalizing of Klein in (North) America:  
Ridley Scott's Alien Re-analyzed.  
Donald Carveth and Naomi Gold***

It is generally acknowledged that Kleinian theory has, until recently, occupied a marginal place in North American psychoanalytic practice (Ogden, 1990, pp. 9-10). Trained in an environment dominated for many years by Freudian ego psychology, mainstream analysts typically received little formative exposure to Kleinian theory. Moreover, those who have opened themselves to Kleinian influences have often appropriated the theory fragmentarily, often "preoedipalizing" it, focusing primarily upon the infant-mother dyad to the exclusion of the phantasies, anxieties and conflicts involving the father and siblings, the triadic dynamics, that Klein so clearly extended to the pregenital, but far from preoedipal, phases of development and layers of the psyche. Glen and Krin Gabbard's analysis of Ridley Scott's film *Alien* provides a good illustration of this tendency among North American analysts.<sup>1</sup>

I

Freud (1931) introduced the vivid metaphor of a "pre-Oedipus phase analogous to the matriarchal Minoan-Mycenaean civilization behind the civilization of Greece," that is, beneath the patriarchal and oedipal layer that he and his followers explored so thoroughly (Freud, 1931, p.226). It has been as if analysts trained in the Freudian school, when they turned to Mrs. Klein at all, did so thinking her main contribution would be to help fulfill Freud's prediction that it would be women analysts who would succeed in mapping the "preoedipal" layers that he himself found "so difficult to grasp in analysis, so grey with age and shadowy and almost impossible to revivify" (Freud, 1931, p.226). The irony here, of course, is that Klein discovered that these layers are not preoedipal at all, nor exclusively characterized by dyadic, mother/infant dynamics, but fraught with the very triangular conflicts, incestuous phantasies and jealousies

regarding both the rival parent and siblings, that Freud confined to the later, so-called phallic-oedipal stage.

Freud regarded the Oedipus complex as the "culmination of infantile sexuality, arising only after the sequential unfolding of earlier, pregenital organizations" (Greenberg and Mitchell, 1983, p. 122). One of Klein's hallmark contributions was her contention that oedipal preoccupations and phantasies arise as early as the first year of life: "pregenital does not mean preoedipal" (Segal, 1989, p.1). Klein was explicit about this in both her early and later writings. In 1928 she wrote, "The early stages of the Oedipus conflict are so largely dominated by pregenital phases of development that the genital phase, when it begins to be active, is at first heavily shrouded and only later, between the third and fifth year of life, becomes clearly recognizable" (Klein, 1928, p. 197). And in 1945, she stated categorically that "the Oedipus complex starts during the first year of life and in both sexes begins to develop to begin with on similar lines" (Klein, 1945, p.65).

Perhaps not just Freudian but even some Kleinian analysts have themselves, until fairly recently, tended to neglect this aspect of Klein's theory, focusing instead on the dyadic relationship between mother and infant. According to Segal (1989), "It is still sometimes mistakenly thought that Klein's work became solely concerned with the baby's relation to the breast and that the role of the father and the Oedipus complex lost in importance in her work" (p.1). By contrast, Segal confirms the importance of the father, "the real father as well as the phantasies about father" about whom "Children not much over two years of age showed oedipal phantasies and had intense anxieties associated with them" (pp.1-2). Certainly for Klein the relation to the mother's breast is "one of the essential factors which determine the whole emotional and sexual development" (Klein, 1945, p.65). However, this exclusive mother-infant relationship soon unfolds into a more complex triadic relationship involving other objects in the child's environment, the siblings as well as the father.

While Klein's extension of oedipal conflicts involving both parents and siblings to the pregenital phases and layers of the psyche is clear, there appears to be some ambiguity in Kleinian writings about the precise situation of such conflicts in relation to the paranoid-schizoid (PS) and depressive (D) positions.<sup>2</sup> The Freudian Oedipus reflects the attained ambivalence and whole-object relating characteristic of the depressive position: what lends it its very poignancy is the guilt and concern of the child toward its rival whom it tenderly loves as well as hates and fears. According to Weininger (1992), "Klein sees the Oedipal relationship at first manifesting itself as an aspect of the child's emotional life during the depressive position--generally at about the time of weaning" (p.81): "The Oedipus situation starts with awareness of the libidinal link between mother and father, in the depressive position, and is associated with its oral ambivalence" (p. 172). But the Oedipus that Klein describes appears to differ from the Freudian complex not only in arising, like D itself, in the pregenital period, much earlier than the phallic-oedipal phase where Freud situates it, but also in that it is infused, at least at the outset, with the primitive intensities, envy and blurring of boundaries brought about by the part-object relations, splitting and projection that characterize the paranoid-schizoid position, even as the child begins to advance toward the depressive position.

In this connection, Hinshelwood (1991) writes that "the development of the Kleinian theory of the Oedipus complex did move it away from the classical notion of the 'actual' parents and into the phantasy world of part-objects in the paranoid-schizoid position" (p.66). On the other hand, Hinshelwood summarizes Britton's view that "as cognitive and emotional potentials develop, the objects come together and the onset of the depressive position creates a situation in which the infant no longer possesses the 'good' object but witnesses the possession of two objects by each other" (p.64). Perhaps such ambiguity may be resolved if we hold that the Oedipus arises in the pregenital period, at a time when although PS phantasies and anxieties are still operative the child is beginning to move toward D and to confront and begin to work through its attendant conflicts and that, in actuality, the Oedipus will take different forms relative to its specific location on the continuum between PS and D. Certainly it would seem inadvisable for Kleinians to parallel the Freudian failure to recognize oedipal conflicts in the pregenital phases by failing to recognize them in the paranoid-schizoid position, confining them to D just as the Freudians confined them to the phallic-oedipal phase.

Klein's description of the Oedipus complex centers on the child's growing realization that the parents are sharing pleasure from which it is excluded and the consequent elaborate, often sadistic phantasies with which it responds. Even as it begins to gain awareness of the mother as a separate object, the infant does not yet differentiate her from the father. It phantasizes the father/penis as part of the mother and imagines her as a container for everything valuable: the breast, milk, babies, the penis. This idealizing phantasy of maternal bounty and goodness serves, as Weininger (1992) points out, to "control the envy and fear that might threaten to turn the increasingly separate figure of the mother into a phantasy persecutor" (p.84). With the growing perception of the mother as a separate, albeit still idealized, object the child's perception of the world is correspondingly enlarged: the people with whom it comes in contact are increasingly recognized as distinct individuals who enjoy relationships with one another.

The most significant effect of this enhanced perception and the child's growing sense of separation from the mother is an awareness of the relationship between the mother and father. But as Segal points out, "Projections color all his perceptions" (Segal, 1989, p.103). The child's actual observations of the parents' relationship are transformed in its phantasies into an image of the parents engaged in constant mutual gratification and this, according to Weininger (1992), "sets the stage for the Oedipal drama": "He has projected the image of total gratification onto [the parents], and he, who is the creator of the projection, is left out" (p.83). The phantasy of the parents as a combined couple serves to defend against the emerging awareness of their independence and differentiation and their sharing of gratifications from which the child is excluded. But such merging of mother and father into a single entity does not alter the fact that the child is excluded from this combined couple (p.84).

To all this, the child reacts with an increase of aggressive feelings and phantasies, attacking the parents and, in his perception, destroying them. The attacked and destroyed parents are subsequently introjected in a further attempt to defend against recognizing their independence and differentiation and their willingness and ability to enjoy sexual

pleasure without him (Weininger, 1992, p.85). The destroyed, introjected parents are now felt by the child to be part of his internal world: "The infant has not only to deal with a destroyed internal breast and mother, but also with the internal destroyed parental couple of the early oedipal situation" (Segal, 1989, p. 104).

A further defense against the perception of the parents as an excluding couple is an outright denial that the father exists at all. The phantasy of a "phallic mother," "the omnipotent mother-with-the-penis" (Weininger, 1992, p.85), is called upon to defend against the relentless jealousy aroused by continued awareness of the parents as a couple. This phantasy goes one step beyond the phantasy of the combined couple, completely conflating mother and father into a single figure, effectively eliminating the offending, excluding couple in the child's mind while preserving the "crucial omnipotence of the mother" (Weininger, 1992, p 85).

Yet even this idealized image cannot be sustained in light of unavoidable, continuing awareness of the parents' existence as distinct individuals and their relationship as a couple and so the infant's attacks continue. In phantasy, the offending couple has been attacked and destroyed, but because they have also been introjected they become persecutors. In the earliest Oedipal stages, the expectation of retaliation intensifies the aggressive, sadistic impulses against the parents. But as the infant begins to move in the direction of the depressive position, the sadistic and attacking impulses and feelings of omnipotent triumph over the "bad" objects come to be complicated by growing sadness at the loss of what are increasingly also recognized as the "good" parents who have been injured in these attacks. Thus, the early Oedipal period that begins with envy, denial, splitting, and sadistic attack upon the parents evolves into a more complex and ambivalent mix of envy, jealousy and aggression accompanied by sadness, guilt and loss.

## II

An illustration of the North American tendency to "preoedipalize" Klein, in this case in the field of applied psychoanalysis, is offered in Glen and Krin Gabbard's (1987) vivid Kleinian analysis of Ridley Scott's *Alien*, a film so charged with Kleinian themes that it might have been written as a kind of fictional case-study. *Alien* portrays almost every key theme in Kleinian theory: the overshadowing presence of a malevolent "Mother"; intense persecutory anxiety; exploration of the interior of the mother's body and attacks on its contents; graphic introjection of a bad breast and then its horrifying projection; a combined parental couple (the android Ash is a duplicitous father allied with and under the control of "Mother"); and a finale in which the sole survivor blasts the alien out into space, "[ridding] herself of badness via projection and then [destroying] the projected badness" (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987, p. 288).

The nightmare begins when crew member Kane, exploring an abandoned spacecraft, disturbs an egglike pod from which an alien life-form leaps out, plastering itself, breast-like, to his face. Diagnostic tests reveal that the creature has established an appendage down his throat that is keeping him alive. The authors comment:

The situation can be understood in terms of the vicissitudes of early infantile development. The ego undergoes splitting and projects that part of itself containing the aggressive instinct, or the death instinct in Kleinian terms, into the original external object, the mother's breast. The infant then feels that the breast is bad, resulting in feelings of persecution. The terrifying but life-sustaining creature in *Alien* represents the bad, persecuting breast: it is the recipient of the projection of the child's internal aggressive drives, while at the same time it performs the traditional nourishing function (pp. 284-285).

In Klein's view, the relief the infant obtains through projection is short-lived: the outside world, having acquired the projected components of the individual's aggression, becomes profoundly threatening. Thus, the attempt to rid oneself of the bad things inside--envy, jealousy and murderous rage--backfires and turns back upon the ego, producing the intense persecutory anxiety characteristic of the paranoid-schizoid position:

Against the overwhelming anxiety of annihilation, the ego evolves a series of mechanisms of defense . . . the ego strives to introject the good and to project the bad. This is not the only use of introjection and projection. There are situations in which the good is projected, in order to keep it safe from what is felt to be overwhelming badness inside, and situations in which persecutors are introjected and even identified with in an attempt to gain control of them. The permanent feature is that in situations of anxiety the split is widened and projection and introjection are used in order to keep persecutory and ideal objects as far as possible from one another, while keeping both under control. The situation may fluctuate rapidly, and persecutors may be felt now outside . . . now inside, producing fears of a hypochondrical nature (Segal, 1964, 26-27).

This dynamic is, as the Gabbards observe, graphically demonstrated in *Alien*, when Kane has apparently been freed from the grip of the creature by its surgical removal and fully restored, or so it is thought. But during a meal with the crew, he is literally destroyed from within when the alien, which was never really expelled, rips through his chest in a burst of demonic frenzy and escapes into the ship.

To translate this sequence into the language of the paranoid-schizoid position, Kane introjected the bad persecutory object with the unconscious fantasy of gaining control over it. The dinner sequence is characterized by . . . a kind of manic denial based on the fantasy that the persecutor has been annihilated. The dinner is disrupted by Kane's hypochondrial concern about something within his body. The bad object is then re-projected -- literally, when the alien rips through his chest wall -- and is once again the source of persecutory anxiety as it disappears into the spacecraft's corridors (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987, p.287).

This striking scene (unforgettable for anyone who has seen the film) illustrates how the mechanisms of defense that are marshalled to protect the individual from experiencing the fear of death within, and from both internal and external persecutors, themselves produce unbearable anxieties.

The strength of the Gabbards' paper lies in its analysis of the dyadic elements in *Alien*, the paranoid conflict between crew members and beast. But this analysis lacks a crucial element. A fuller exposition in the Kleinian mode demands a more complete account of the specific origins of the crews' rage. The film portrays the precipitating event as the crews' exploration of a foreign ship containing the alien, which subsequently attacks one crew member. But it must be remembered that in the Kleinian worldview, the outer world is a reflection of the inner world, and the perception of attack is as much an effect of the projection of aggressive tendencies as of external events. Citing Segal, the Gabbards note Klein's description of the infant's fantasies about attacking the mother's body and its (imagined) contents, fantasies which include "scooping out and possessing all of its contents, particularly . . . her babies" (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987, p.284, citing Segal, 1964, p.7).

This scenario is played out in the crew's initial investigation of the abandoned spacecraft, the inner lining of which bears a striking resemblance to the inside of a body (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987, p.284). This "resemblance to the fantasized mother" is intensified by the discovery of egglike structures deep in the ship's hold, one of which houses the alien that subsequently attaches itself to Kane. It is this alien that the crew's spaceship computer, "Mother," is so ruthlessly determined to take safely back to earth. The crew/siblings have penetrated and explored the mother's body and find--horror of horrors!--another baby, a rival, whom they hate and fear and who, due to projection of their murderous rage, now appears determined to destroy them with the approval of the traitorous "Mother." The crew is subsequently locked in a pitched Kleinian battle, seeking both to destroy the alien invader while being malevolently pursued by it, an evil force they have called into being through their own projections. Moreover, they are locked in battle with the malicious "Mother," so perceived because she ruthlessly protects the alien sibling and strives to bring it home at all costs.

It is this theme of oedipal triangulation that the Gabbards have overlooked. Since Freud, the concept of oedipal conflict has included rivalry with siblings as well as with parents. This theme is conspicuously signified in the film by the name of the character Kane (Cain), history's first murderer and first perpetrator of fratricide. The film in fact portrays three aspects of one oedipal dynamic: the rage of siblings at the faithless mother; the rage of these same siblings at the unwanted "alien"; and the helplessness ensuing from the absence of effectual fathers, the destruction of one father-figure and the deceptive alliance of another with "Mother".

Recognition of this oedipal component makes us aware that the paranoid infantile anxieties so effectively portrayed in *Alien* are decisively triadic rather than merely dyadic--a point that illustrates the importance of understanding the Oedipus in both PS and D in theoretical, clinical and applied psychoanalysis. Such recognition adds context and nuance to our understanding of the crew members' rage and suffering which we can now appreciate as that of older siblings who feel utterly betrayed by a mother who seems determined at all costs, even that of the lives of her older children, to bring home an alien sibling. Compounding this triangulated scenario is the crew's growing recognition that there is no recourse to fathers: their father-figures are either helpless to protect them or, as in the case of the android, Ash, a mechanical agent of the evil mother in her tireless devotion to the alien, an instance of the combined parent image of Kleinian theory.

The Gabbards correctly recognize that this film reproduces a world "much like Klein's view of the infant's early months of life" (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1987, p. 284). However, they neglect Klein's discovery of the oedipal conflicts that also come into play in these early months because they, like many North American readers of Klein, make the mistake of conflating "pregenital" and "preoedipal" (Segal, 1989, p. 1). Recognition of the film's oedipal themes fills out the Gabbards' otherwise perceptive analysis. In view of the current popular cultural preoccupation with the theme of "alien abduction," it is interesting to speculate about the role of primitive sibling oedipal conflict and phantasy in this obsession with unwelcome and invasive visits by alien creatures.

#### Notes

1. In the following discussion we will not challenge the traditional psychoanalytic practice of linking layers of the psyche uncovered in analytic work with adults and older children to the hypothesized stages of development of which they are the supposed residues. Elsewhere, one of us (Carveth, 1999) has called such developmental linkages into question. Our focus in the present paper is on the role of oedipal conflict in the layers of the psyche Freud regarded as stemming from the preoedipal phases, as well as their role in the psychic "position" Klein called paranoid-schizoid. We refrain from challenging here the traditional linkage of such layers and positions to specific phases of child development.

2. Supplementing Freud's theory of *stages* of psychosexual development, Klein's (1946) model of the mind posits two *positions* or configurations of internal object-relations, phantasies and anxieties. In the more primitive, paranoid-

schizoid position, psychotic confusion, in which good and bad are insufficiently distinguished and good turns into bad and vice versa, is transcended through splitting of self and object images into all-good and all-bad part-objects respectively (a split or schizoid state of affairs). This enables the good self and object to be kept separate and free from contamination or destruction by the bad self or object. In PS projective identification is employed to, in phantasy place the good part-self or part-object into another for safekeeping, or the bad part-self or part-object into another in order to evacuate it and keep it at a safe distance from the good self and object. Persecutory anxiety emerges in the face of this projected badness (a paranoid state of affairs), while envy arises in relation to the idealized all-good object resulting from the projected goodness. With advance toward the depressive position such splitting gives way to integration and whole- as distinct from part-object relating begins to emerge. As good and bad are brought together what Winnicott (1963) called "the capacity for concern" emerges with recognition that the hated all-bad object is also the loved all-good object. Depressive anxiety arises that one's hatred toward what one previously saw as an all-bad object (or self) may have done irrevocable damage to what one now realizes is also the good object (or self). Out of such depressive anxiety, guilt and remorse, attempts at reparation may emerge. Since PS and D are positions rather than stages of mental life, the former is never entirely superseded by the latter, but the two continue to oscillate and interpenetrate in complex ways.

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*Alien* (1979). Directed by Ridley Scott. Story by Dan O'Bannon and Ronald Shusett. Cast (in credits order): Tom Skerritt, Sigourney Weaver, Veronica Cartwright, Harry Dean Stanton, John Hurt, Ian Holm, Yaphet Kotto, Bolaj Badejo, Helen Horton. Produced by Gordon Carroll, David Giler, Walter Hill, Ivor Powell (associate), Ronald Shusett (executive). Production Companies: Brandywine Productions, Ltd. and 20th Century Fox. Distributor: 20th Century Fox Film Corporation.

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