

# Mele's Self-Deception in *Macbeth*

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## Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has attracted the attention of many critics who attempt to study the psychology of its principal characters. For example, in "Phantasmagoric Macbeth" David Willbern provides a psychoanalytic reading of the play where he views the play as a scrambled dream, in which everything is representative of one or more inner desire or process. Michael Goldman's "Speaking Evil: Language and Action in *Macbeth*" refers to Macbeth's ambition as the main reason that leads him to do what he knows is morally wrong. Similarly, Lily B. Doren's "*Macbeth: A Study in Fear*" claims that although Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have different psychological makeups, they are similar in having the passion of ambition that motivates both to kill Duncan. Seth Shugar's "Knowing Is Not Enough" is another study that attempts to deal with Macbeth's psychology. According to Shugar, it is Macbeth's "akrasia" —his inability to perform an action he knows to be right—rather than his ambition that leads to his downfall.

Despite the variety of these critical approaches to Macbeth's psychology, this chapter attempts to provide a new critical interpretation of his behavior through the lens of self-deception theory that has gained an increasing popularity at the hands of Alfred Mele. Thus, taking this theory as a framework, this chapter attempts to explain how Macbeth goes through some of Mele's conditions to enter self-deception by following several mechanisms such as negative misinterpretation, selective focusing, and confirmation bias. The chapter begins by introducing Mele's self-deception and then provides a detailed discussion of two of Mele's conditions for a person to enter self-deception, which are perfectly apt for Macbeth.

## Mele's Definition of Self-Deception

In his book *Self-Deception Unmasked*, Alfred Mele attempts to provide answers to such questions as how can a person deceive himself? What are the forms of self-deception? What are the conditions of self-deception? From Mele's perspective, self-deception happens when a person sustains some incorrect belief despite evidence to the contrary because of some motivation. As he puts it, "people enter self-deception in acquiring a belief that P if and only if P is false and they acquire the belief in a suitably biased way" (120). In this case, self-deception is a psychological state in which the subject is "motivated or has a motivated component" to believe in a specific proposition (Mele 5). It requires the person to commit his own action to a motivation and that on the basis of that incentive the individual endorses certain psychological strategies and behavioral patterns that persuade him of the truth of what he believes.

Moreover, Mele argues that there are two different forms of self-deception: "straight" vs. "twisted." Straight self-deception "involves an agent's being self-deceived about some proposition P is being true when she is motivationally biased in coming to believe that P is true" (25). In this type of self-deception, the self-deceptive belief matches the person's desire that causes him to discount data that should count against the desired outcome, and to see data as supporting the desired outcome when it really does not. In twisted self-deception, "the person is self-deceived in believing something that he wants to be false" (Mele 4). In this type of self-deception, the person's self-deceptive belief opposes his desire, and he ends up believing what he does not wish. In both forms, "our desiring something to be true sometimes exerts a biasing influence on what we believe" (Mele 11).

## Mele's Conditions for Self-Deception

In *Self-Deception Unmasked*, Mele outlines four possible conditions for the subject (S) to enter self-deception:

1. S's belief that P is false.

2. S treats data relevant, or at least seemingly relevant, to the truth-value of P in a motivationally biased way.
3. This biased treatment is a nondeviant cause of S's acquiring the belief that P.
4. The body of the data possessed by S at the time provides greater warrant for not-P than for P (50-51).

To serve the objectives of this chapter, the following discussion deals extensively with the first two of these conditions, which the character of Macbeth perfectly meets.

### **S's (Macbeth's) Belief that P is False**

From Mele's perspective, for anyone to be self-deceived, he must believe in something (proposition P) that he knows is untrue. This implies that the self-deceived person intentionally deceives himself into believing something that is false. As Mele puts it, "people enter self-deception in acquiring a belief that P if and only if P is false" (120). In this way, self-deception entails a blind or unexamined acceptance of a belief that can easily be "spurious if the person were to inspect the belief impartially or from the perspective of the generalized other" (Sahdra 213). Moreover, by being resigned to this false belief, the subject is unable to get out of his self-deception.

This is typically true of Macbeth, who believes in something that he knows is false, although "the body of the data possessed" by Macbeth when he meets the witches for the first time "provides greater warrant for not-P than for P" (Mele 51). For example, when Macbeth first receives the witches' prophecies, "All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter!" (I.3.50), he is so much sure their prophecies are false that he questions their validity:

I know I am Thane of Glamis,  
 But how of Cawdor? The Thane of Cawdor lives,  
 A prosperous gentleman; and to be king  
 Stands not within the prospect of belief,  
 No more than to be Cawdor. (I.3.71-75)

According to this quotation, Macbeth questions the truth of the witches' sayings, and he knows deep in his heart that their prophecies are false for many reasons. First, Macbeth knows "The Thane of Cawdor lives. Why do you dress me / In borrowed robes?" (I.3.108-9). Second, Macbeth is aware that it is impossible for him to be the next in line for the throne because after the king's death, his eldest son, Malcolm, whom Duncan names "The Prince of Cumberland" (I.4.39), will be his heir. Third, the prophecies are told by witches, who are considered to have supernatural powers that none would trust. Macbeth himself once said "damn'd all those that trust them!" (IV.1.161), and Banquo emphasizes this idea when he said,

But 'tis strange;  
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,  
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,  
Win us with honest trifles, to betray [u]s. (I.3.122-125)

then, too, the witches' physical existence is so doubtful that neither Macbeth nor Banquo is sure of their reality. To use Macbeth's words regarding the existence of the witches: "There's no such thing. / It is the bloody business which informs / Thus to mine eyes" (II.1.48-50). Thus, these witches are, like Macbeth's dagger, "a false creation, / Proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain?" (II.1.39-40).

Regardless of their dramatic role, the fact that the witches appear only to Macbeth and Banquo at the beginning of the play might find an explanation from a psychological point of view. Macbeth and Banquo are suffering from sleep deprivation because of the fatigue of the battle that runs for the whole day. Thus, one can argue that Macbeth's and Banquo's fatigue results in "the experiences of individual psychotic experiences such as delusions or hallucinations" (Reeve et al. 111). In other words, their physical fatigue and lack of sleep lead them to see things that do not exist. As Brandon Peters has precisely stated,

Beginning to hallucinate is among the more common symptoms of sleep deprivation. A hallucination is the perception of something that is not really present in the environment ... sleep deprivation can

actually cause other symptoms that mimic mental illness, such as disorientation and paranoid thoughts... Though visual experiences predominate, some hallucinations may involve hearing things. These auditory hallucinations may range from voices to loud sounds or other stimuli.

In the light of Brandon's account, because of their lack of sleep, both Macbeth and Banquo experienced visual and auditory hallucinations causing them to be unable to differentiate between what is real and unreal. The way the witches appear to Banquo and Macbeth supports this argument. They appear and disappear like a visual hallucination, making it difficult for Macbeth and Banquo to distinguish between the hallucinatory and the real:

You should be women,  
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
That you are so. (I.3.45-47)

Banquo here suggests that he is really confused about the nature of these witches and supports the argument that they are not likely real witches, but only hallucinatory ones. In another quotation, Banquo reiterates his doubts about the physical existence of the witches and suggests that he and Macbeth might be hallucinating:

Were such things here as we do speak about?  
Or have we eaten on the insane root  
That takes the reason prisoner? (I.3.83-85)

Although Macbeth knows that the witches are unlikely to be real, and their prophecies thus might be false, the question remains: How does Macbeth deceive himself despite his belief in the falsehood of the witches' prophecies?

From the standpoint of Mele's theory, Macbeth tends to believe the witches' prophecies because he wants them to be true even when considering these prophecies later would show that they are probably false. Macbeth's burning desire to know where the witches got their information, "Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more" (I.3.71),

implies his interest in the prophecies themselves. This explains how Macbeth starts the process of discounting any evidence that will contradict his desire to fulfill the most important of them all: to be a king. In this way, Macbeth's self-deception has a "doxastic conflict" between the false belief he acquires ("you might be the King hereafter") and the true belief he denies ("King Duncan is still alive").

After meeting the three witches, Macbeth has two contrasting beliefs, but is conscious of only one of them, because he wants to remain unconscious of the other. In other words, Macbeth deceives himself by believing in what the witches said and behaves in such a way as to motivate himself to believe the negation of that truth ("King Duncan should be dead") by arranging the murder with his wife. Thus, in his search for evidence of his belief that he is going to be a king, Macbeth engages in belief-misleading activities such as sending a letter to his wife to create an imaginary world where he is preparing himself to be a king. In other words, Macbeth engages in a form of "mental *simulation*, i.e. his motivation to avoid the recognition of ( $\neg p$ ) leads him to mentally escape the real world and intermittently inhabit a 'p-world,' an imaginary environment which protects him from the inconvenient or undesired evidence" (Porcher).

After hearing Ross's greeting, Macbeth has evidence based on which he believes that the other witches' predictions are more likely to be true than to be false. This is called, in Mele's words, "positive misinterpretation" (26) where Macbeth misinterprets some evidence (being appointed as Thane of Cawdor) as favoring his desired proposition (I will be a king) "when that evidence, in absence of the biasing desire, would easily be recognized as counting against the desired proposition" (Mele 27). From the standpoint of Mele's theory, Macbeth's desire to be a king leads him to interpret any data to support this belief, whereas he would effortlessly decide to act against this belief in the desire's absence. Thus, Macbeth constructs Ross's message in a certain way so that it looks like evidence for P (I will be a king). This is very clear in Macbeth's first soliloquy: "Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor— /

The greatest is behind” (1.3.116-17). In this soliloquy, Macbeth deceives nobody but himself, and it marks the starting point of his self-deception because he convinces himself of something that he does not believe is right.

Thus, Macbeth convinces himself that he is destined to be a king, which reflects his mental state as a self-deceived person who is convinced that he has an obligation to do this by either fair means or foul. Macbeth’s first step is to send a letter to his wife, waiting for positive confirmation from her to go ahead with his next move. By sending this letter, Macbeth, to use Mele’s words, wants to reach a state of mind, that is, “the belief that P, which he likes, or wants, to believe, and he also wants reality to be exactly as he wants it to be, that is, P to be true” (25). The letter reads as follows:

They met me in the day of success, and I have learned by the perfect’st report they have more in them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanished. Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it, came missives from the King, who all-hailed me Thane of Cawdor, by which title, before, these weird sisters saluted me and referred me to the coming on of time with “Hail, king that shalt be!” This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou might’st not lose the dues of rejoicing by being ignorant of what greatness is promised thee. Lay it to thy heart, and farewell. (I.5.1-13)

By writing this letter, Macbeth has, from the standpoint of Mele’s theory, a self-focused desire to believe these prophecies, and this would be the principal reason for his self-deception. The opening and closing sentences make it clear how he feels about the witches and their prophecies. His reiteration of the witches’ prophecy in the letter, “Hail, king that shalt be!” (I.5.9-10), implies his endorsement of that prediction. Therefore, as he has been convinced, Macbeth is doing his best to convince his wife of the witches’ prophecies. That is why he tells his wife every detail of what happened in a way to support his desire to be a king. For example, Macbeth informs Lady Macbeth about how he was told he was becoming

Thane of Cawdor, and then King. It is to be noted that Macbeth never mentioned anything in the letter related to Banquo's issue; an action that implies that he is trying to avoid anything that will destroy his happy belief and seeks, instead, to focus his attention on the person—"my dearest partner of greatness" (I.5.10-11)—who is ready to make it true: Lady Macbeth.

Moreover, Macbeth's concluding the letter by asking his wife to rejoice with him about the greatness that is promised to them is an obvious indication of his straight self-deception because he is clearly self-deceived about the witches' prophecies being true when he is motivationally biased to believe these predictions. Thus, Macbeth's letter could be explained as "part of an attempt to deceive oneself, or to cause oneself to believe something, or to make it easier for oneself to believe something (e.g., intentionally focusing on data of a certain kind as part of an attempt to deceive oneself into believing that P)" (18). From the standpoint of Mele's theory, Macbeth writes this letter as if he believed that he has already become a king, which suggests that he believes he is; and his saying "this have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness" (I.5.10-11) refers to his absolute self-deception by focusing his attention on the only prophecy that refers to him as a future king. Moreover, "one could be motivated to self-deception by having a desire to believe what one's peers believe, while being indifferent to the truth or falsity of what is believed" (Funkhouser). In this regard, Macbeth needs someone to confirm what he desires and this could be achieved only by his wife. As William Ruddick has stated,

We choose the company of those whose views coincide with our own. Hence, our projects come to be questionable only from a perspective we are unlikely or even unable to take ... our associates, out of sympathy or cowardice, tend to keep the lights turned down low. (383)

From Ruddick's point of view, since the person looks only to those who hold similar views, he is unlikely to find any help in recognizing his self-deception. This is true of Macbeth when looks to Lady

Macbeth as a confirming voice to carry out the ugly deed of killing his own king. As Maria L. Howell has observed,

Lady Macbeth's triple greetings, "Great Glamis, worthy Cawdor / Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter" (I.5.53-4), not only resonates with the witches' predictions at the beginning of the play, it leaves no doubt that Lady Macbeth sees the kingship as a reality which has already come into being. (6)

To conclude this part, by sending the letter to his wife, the self-deceived Macbeth wants to be in a state of mind of belief that P, which he knows is false. Despite his knowledge that these prophecies are false, Macbeth continues to ignore the facts, and instead holds onto this false belief because of his desire to be king. This leads to our discussion of Mele's second condition for an individual to enter self-deception.

### **S (Macbeth) Treats Data Relevant, or at Least Seemingly Relevant, to the Truth-Value of P in a Motivationally Biased Way**

From the perspective of Mele's second condition, one of the factors that cause a subject to be self-deceived is his treatment of the data provided to him at the time of his self-deception in a motivationally biased way, and his doing so is triggered by his desire concerning whether his acquired belief is true or not. As Mele puts it, "S's desiring that P leads S to manipulate data relevant or seemingly relevant to the truth value of P, this manipulation is a cause of S's acquiring the belief that P" (22). This is very pertinent to Macbeth, where his desire for the throne affects his reasoning in a way that leads to his self-deception.

In view of Mele's theory, what causes Macbeth to be self-deceived is that he "forms a false belief due to the causal influence of a motivational state (typically, a desire)" (Fernández 380). In other words, Macbeth's desiring P (being a king) leads him to misinterpret the witches' prophecies in a way that would never be if Macbeth lacked this desire. Throughout the play, Macbeth does not deny that he has "black and deep desires" (I.4.51) for the throne.

For example, he openly states that it is his “[v]aulting ambition” (I.7.27) that is behind his hidden desire to be king. Thus, Macbeth’s “[v]aulting ambition” to get “the imperial theme” motivates him to fall into what is called “intentional misinterpretation” of the witches’ prophecies. In Act I, Scene 3, Macbeth says in an aside:

Two truths are told,  
As happy prologues to the swelling act  
Of the imperial theme. (I.3.127-8)

In these lines, Macbeth misinterprets the witches’ prophecies and expresses his own desire that they might be true. Because of this desire, Macbeth is motivated to think about the prophecies in a biased way by regarding them as “happy prologues to the swelling act / Of the imperial theme,” and his motivated desire causes him to deal with the evidence in a way at odds with its real implication. In Mele’s theory, this is called motivated reasoning, which is defined as,

the process of arriving at a conclusion on the basis of motivationally biased information processing. Thus, an agent who desires to believe  $p$  may interpret, misinterpret, seek and recall evidence in a way that supports  $p$ , even if the stock of available evidence supports  $\neg p$ . (Kopylov)

From Mele’s standpoint, Macbeth’s motivated reasoning leads him to be biased in his treatment of Ross’s message “He bade me, from him, call thee Thane of Cawdor” (I.3.105) that might confirm his belief that he is going to be king. Without this motivated reasoning, self-deception would not occur in Macbeth’s inner mind. According to Seth Shugar, “Macbeth is in the grip of an immense, self-deceiving want. He wants, wants deeply, to live up to Lady Macbeth’s idealized image of him as a conquering warrior-king who fully deserves to rule” (69).

Macbeth’s biased thinking leads him to believe everything that supports his desire for the throne; thus, he looks for evidence that backs up his original idea about “the imperial theme” rather than seeking out information that opposes it. He writes a letter to his

wife to receive an affirmative answer that supports his desire to be a king. He looks for the outcomes that he would get if the witches' prophecies were true, rather than what would occur if they were untrue. Although Macbeth has formed a false belief, he has treated this belief in a motivationally biased way. The fact that Macbeth admits in his letter that the witches "have more in them than mortal knowledge" refers to his biased treatment of the data given him by the witches. Moreover, the letter is another example of two self-deception mechanisms that Macbeth endorses: "confirmation bias" and "selective focusing."

As a matter of fact, after hearing the witches' prophecies, Macbeth falls into what is called confirmation bias, "the tendency to search for, interpret, favor, and recall information in a way that confirms one's preexisting beliefs or hypotheses, while giving disproportionately less consideration to alternative possibilities" (Plous 233). By writing his letter, Macbeth creates his own "subjective social reality" from his perception of the information he has received, and this dictates his behavior in dealing with people around him. Thus, Macbeth's cognitive bias leads to "perceptual distortion, inaccurate judgment, illogical interpretation, or what is broadly called irrationality" (Kahneman and Tversky 431).

This is very clear in Macbeth's subsequent thinking and action: he does not perceive circumstances objectively. Rather he remembers information selectively, and interprets it in a biased way. For example, he starts to pick out those bits of data that make him believe he is going to be king. Accordingly, as he becomes more convinced of this belief, he tends to disregard information that contradicts that belief. Consequently, being influenced by his bias toward the throne, Macbeth decides to go ahead with his plan to do away with his king.

I am settled, and bend up  
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.  
Away, and mock the time with fairest show;  
False face must hide what the false heart doth know. (I.7.79-82)

At the same time, Macbeth's confirmation bias makes him engage in several rationalizations and confabulations of why he formed his belief of being a future king:

This supernatural soliciting  
Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,  
Why hath it given me earnest of success  
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.  
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair  
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs  
Against the use of nature? (I.3.130-37)

This quotation can be read as an explicit verbalization of Macbeth's self-deceiving inclination to believe propositions that he knows are false and that his judgments are colored by his motivation because the process of constructing justifications is biased by Macbeth's goals, where he is motivated to arrive at a conclusion. This motivation causes Macbeth to

enact certain mental strategies and behavioral patterns that convince him or her of the truth of P, despite his or her exposure to information that tips the scales towards accepting the truth of the proposition (or state of facts) not-P. (Marcus 187)

In his attempt to get out of this confusion, Macbeth tries to apply reason. Unfortunately, his rationalization results in erroneous decision making because this biased information tends to affect his frame of reference, leaving him with an inadequate understanding of the situation:

Present fears  
Are less than horrible imaginings:  
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,  
Shakes so my single state of man that function  
Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is  
But what is not. (I.3.137-42)

In this quotation Macbeth loses his sense of objectivity and of rationality, and becomes somewhat delusional. He has a conflict between his wicked thoughts of killing his own king and not to proceed with them: “Present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings.” Moreover, Macbeth becomes more disturbed about what might happen than about reality: “nothing is, but what is not.”

In addition, there is another psychological mechanism that Macbeth unconsciously endorses, and that contributes to his self-deception: selective focusing. Under the influence of his desire to be king, Macbeth tends to focus on evidence that seems to confirm his claim and, contrarywise, to overlook the evidence that seems to disconfirm it. In his letter to his wife, Macbeth sets his mind on being a king and ignores all other possibilities that might help him make a more informed decision. Part of Macbeth’s selective focusing is to make his attention focused exclusively on one aspect of things; that is, to start following up his thoughts with actions right now.

From this moment  
The very firstlings of my heart shall be  
The firstlings of my hand. And even now,  
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done[.] (IV.1.168-71)

Unfortunately, focusing his actions to become King of Scotland brings out the worst in Macbeth and makes him unconscious to the truth of reality. Macbeth’s biases and selective focusing distort his reasoning and judgment:

If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me  
Without my stir. (I.3.143-44)

However, after killing his own king, recognizing that he has violated one of his moral principles, Macbeth feels some sort of mental anguish:

We will proceed no further in this business.  
He hath honored me of late, and I have bought

Golden opinions from all sorts of people,  
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,  
Not cast aside so soon. (I.7.31-5)

In this case, Macbeth suffers from a radical dissociation between his deeds and his moral sense: “To know my deed, ’twere best not know myself” (II.2.76). In psychology, this is known as “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger 93). Resolving this dissonance requires Macbeth either to “change his behavior to align more closely with his beliefs, or to change his beliefs to align more closely with his behavior” (Festinger 93). Since it is easier to “change beliefs than it is to change behavior, he tends to resolve dissonance through changing his beliefs” (Cooper 15). The best way to do that is through the immoral act of killing. Once Macbeth gets into the mode of self-deception, it is very difficult for him to get out of the cycle:

I am in blood  
Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o’er. (III.4.137-39)

To sum up, from the perspective of Mele’s second condition, Macbeth believes what the witches said because he *wishes* to believe these prophecies, and this desire has prompted him to deal with the evidence concerning their prophecies in a prejudiced way.

## Conclusion

This chapter provides a new analysis of Macbeth’s character in the light of Alfred Mele’s theory of self-deception, which has been proved to be a fruitful approach to closely examine how Macbeth is predominantly a striking case of self-deception. From the viewpoint of Mele’s theory, Macbeth deceives himself by his desire to be king, and this causes him to be biased in treating the witches’ prophecies in “a motivationally biased way.” Thus, the witches are not responsible for deceiving Macbeth, but rather they are “the internal workings of Macbeth’s own mind in an imaginative form, which, however, he himself does not recognize as his own” (Snider 194). In other words,

their prophetic sayings are just a reflection of his inner desire and feelings, and Macbeth has a case of “wishful thinking.”

In the light of Mele’s theory, if the witches’ prophecies did not reflect Macbeth’s inner and dark desires, he would not deal with them in a prejudiced way and would not remain firm in his belief that he is going to be king even though he knows that the witches are lying. Moreover, what makes Macbeth count as a typical Mele’s self-deceived model is not merely that his belief that he will be king is sustained by a motivationally prejudiced handling of his evidence, but because holding this belief requires Macbeth’s vigorous effort to escape believing that he is not. Were Macbeth able to rid himself of such self-deceit, he would be more skillful in making ethical decisions and living a moral life.

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