What is ambition?

Ambition is dreaming of becoming more than what one now is. Macbeth dreams of becoming king, though he is now Thane of Glamis, and later Thane of Cawdor. Why does he dream of becoming it then? : Because he feels his role, which he is now playing (his actuality), is more than that of a subject in terms of its meaning.

Macbeth compares the meaning of his title with its actuality: though he is a subject, actually he plays the role of king. The meaning comes from his sensation of the role in the relationship with others including Duncan. If his role is bigger than it was before, his meaning of his self needs to adjust itself accordingly. Macbeth is now the only man who can protect the kingdom and save it from a foreign invasion, which is the role King Duncan should have taken but couldn’t. Without him, Duncan would no longer be king. Compared with the present role of King Duncan, his role now exceeds that of subject; it is as much as the role of a king. So he feels that there’s a kind of discrepancy between his role and its actuality; so his title should be other than what it is now to fit in the reality of it.

In this case, by his comparison he becomes a sign. For him, his role as subject is a sign which has actually the meaning of other sign, king. Though he is actually king in terms of his role he is now playing, he is still thane, a subject. Unlike his title, his role refers to the meaning of king, so that his title should be changed into king, and yet he is now not a king. This discrepancy tempts him to be a man fit for the actual. A sign to function as a sign, however, should negate its property, its physicality, that is, Macbeth himself. For Macbeth to become king, he should first deny (negate) that he is now a subject of Duncan, because a subject cannot be itself and king at the same time by its concept. The concept of subject is the opposite of that of king. This means that he should destroy the base upon which he relies to become other than what he is. What he is is the consequence of his relationship with Duncan and other lords. So only by negating himself can he become king; in other words, he should forget, to become king, that he is a subject of Duncan.

The discrepancy between the meaning of a title and its reality, however, doesn’t stop here. Macbeth feels he is not safe as a king; he fears someone might know his dirty deed of killing Duncan and try to kill him. A king who feels he is not safe as a king is not a king, because the fear comes from the fact that he has not yet fully achieved becoming king, though he has got the title. Even as king, Macbeth thinks his title as king and its actuality don’t agree. His kingship is still imperfect; He is actually on the way to becoming king. Macbeth’s sense of his imperfection is expressed in the fear for his future in particular: Banquo’s descendants shall be kings, instead of his, as the Weird Sisters foretold. He thinks he killed Duncan for Banquo’s descendants; for him he is actually not a king but a man who is helping Banquo’s descendants become kings. Conscious of his reality, he becomes a sign again; he thinks whether his title as king is equivalent to the reality of it or not. He is a sign which should always refer to the meaning of king. As a king, he is the man who should feel he is king in every way; he should be king whose meaning conforms to his reality, but he is not. Thus come inhuman atrocities committed by him; He is not a man but a devil because he has negated himself, stopped being a human being, which means he becomes a being out of the human society which gives him meaning as a man.

As far as Macbeth is conscious of the imperfection, he cannot be himself, because a sign to function as a sign must negate itself. Macbeth always negates himself; by the negation, he is now an alienated being, alienated from his wife and his people. Macbeth thinks nothing of them; he only thinks of becoming a perfect king, but perfection in reality is impossible as there is no 100% pure gold in the real world. Alienated from the milieu, his kingdom, by which he is what he himself is, whatever it is, he is

nothing but a sign -- a sign this time which has no meaning because it goes out of the context which gives it a meaning. He is now an empty signifier. By killing everyone who might be the cause of his fear, he is actually a man who is sawing the branch on which he is sitting; he is king and rebel at the same time. He signifies nothing.

And what is king? Is he a man who has the title of king no matter what he is? No. The reason why a man is called king is that people in the kingdom accept him as such. Of course, there are some who don’t agree. But it doesn’t matter; even rebels themselves are proofs that the man is king. It’s because he is king that they can rebel against him. In other words, he is a relative being. Whether a man is king or not is a matter of acceptance, agreement, and consensus. When most of the people accept him as king, he is king. Then the king is as much as they are not king. He is king and not king at the same time because the king and his people share the same power, neither of them possessing it entirely. There’s no absolute being in the universe as there is no absolutely 100% pure gold in the world. Subjects, though they are not called king, are kings as much as the king is not (subject). By the same token, a king is king and not king at the same time. A beggar may share only a small portion of the power but he is king as much as the king is not a beggar. The king is king because there are those who are not kings. This is what ‘Fair is foul and foul is fair’ means. A is non A. This is Shakespeare’s way of showing what a thing really is. The whole play is based on this principle of contradiction, which Aristotle said we should avoid in our discourse. In this way, however, Shakespeare tries to show what a man really is. It seems to be contradictory and paradoxical, but it’s a way of showing the reality of a thing not conceptually but in its actuality.

Excerpts from Chuang Tze’s ‘Making All Things Equal’

To use a finger to show that a finger is not a finger is not as good as using a non-finger to show that a finger is not a finger. To use a horse to show that a horse is not a horse is not as good as using a non-horse to show that a horse is not a horse,7 Heaven and earth are one finger; the ten thousand things are one horse.

(<https://terebess.hu/english/chuangtzu.html>)