Organic & Biomolecular Chemistry

ROYAL SOCIETY OF CHEMISTRY

COMMUNICATION

View Article Online
View Journal | View Issue

Cite this: *Org. Biomol. Chem.*, 2021, **19**, 10565

Received 2nd November 2021,
Accepted 19th November 2021

DOI: 10.1039/d1ob02153b

rsc.li/obc

Glutathione peroxidase mimics based on conformationally-restricted, *peri*-like, 4,5-disubstituted fluorene dichalcogenides†

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Glutathione peroxidase (GPx) regulates cellular peroxide levels through glutathione oxidation. GPx-mimics based on 4,5-di-substituted fluorene diselenides, their oxides, and ditellurides show catalytic activities consistent with conformational restriction about the dichalcogen bond.

Organoselenium compounds play a central role in biological systems and medicinal chemistry.[1] The selenocysteine-containing enzyme glutathione peroxidase (GPx) catalyses the reduction of peroxides through oxidation of the endogenous thiol glutathione to glutathione disulfide.[2] The build-up of reactive oxygen species such as peroxides is associated with certain disease states, and hence small selenium-containing molecules which can mimic the function of GPx have potential in drug development.[1,2] A wide range of GPx mimics containing diverse selenium functionality has been investigated, with the aminoselenide Ebselen **1** reaching phase 3 clinical trials for a variety of diseases associated with oxidative stress (Fig. 1).[2,3]

Diselenides are promising GPx mimics,[4–7] with even the simple diphenyl diselenide showing two times greater activity than Ebselen.[6] In 2011, Back reported that 1,8-, *peri*-substituted, naphthalene diselenides **2** show an order of magnitude greater GPx-like activity compared with diphenyl diselenide (Fig. 1).[7] Restricting the conformation around the diselenide bond to almost planar, as found in **2**, reduces the HOMO–LUMO energy gap and raises the energy of the HOMO compared with conformationally-unrestricted diphenyl diselenide, thereby increases the rate of oxidation of **2** by peroxide in the rate-determining step.

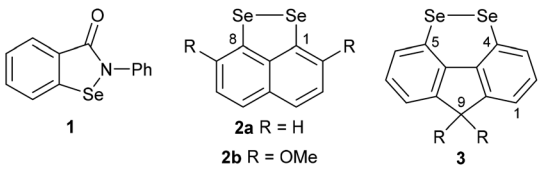

Fig. 1 Selenium-containing GPx mimics: Ebselen **1**, Back's conformationally-restricted 1,8-*peri*-substituted naphthalene diselenides **2** and proposed conformationally-restricted 4,5-disubstituted fluorene diselenides **3** in this study.

In a search for alternative conformationally-restricted aryl diselenides‡ that show enhanced GPx-like activity and which are amenable to structural variation towards medicinal chemistry applications, we considered the previously unreported 4,5-fluorene diselenides **3** (Fig. 1). As with *peri*-substituted 1,8-naphthalenes **2**, the near planarity of fluorene[8] should constrain the geometry of the diselenide bond, and the close proximity of groups in the 4,5-(bay) region should favour dichalcogen bond formation.[9] In this paper we report the first investigation into the synthesis and properties of **3**, its mono- and trioxides, the corresponding ditelluride and their GPx-like activity.

Fluorene diselenides **3a** (R = Me) and **3b** (R = Bu) were synthesized from fluorenes **4a** and **4b**, through quenching the 4,5-dilithiofluorene species, generated using BuLi-TMEDA,[9] with elemental selenium (Scheme 1). Diselenide oxidation was investigated, in view of selenium oxides showing potential GPx-like activity, and to compare their behaviour with the analogous 5-membered ring naphthalene bis-selenium species reported by Kice (**2a**)[10] and Back (**2b**).[7] Oxidation with 1.2 equivalents of *m*CPBA in Et_2O gave selenolseleninates **5a** and **5b** along with recovered starting material. We did not see any evidence of formation of the symmetrical selenenic anhydride in these mono-oxidations, in contrast to the oxidation of **2a**, where a mixture of isomeric monoxides is observed.[10] Use of a larger excess (3.5 equivalents) of *m*CPBA resulted in the precipitation of seleninic anhydrides **6** as single stereoisomers in excellent 85–95% yields. These were assigned as the *trans*, C_2-symmetric stereoisomers, rather than the alternative *cis*, *meso* struc-

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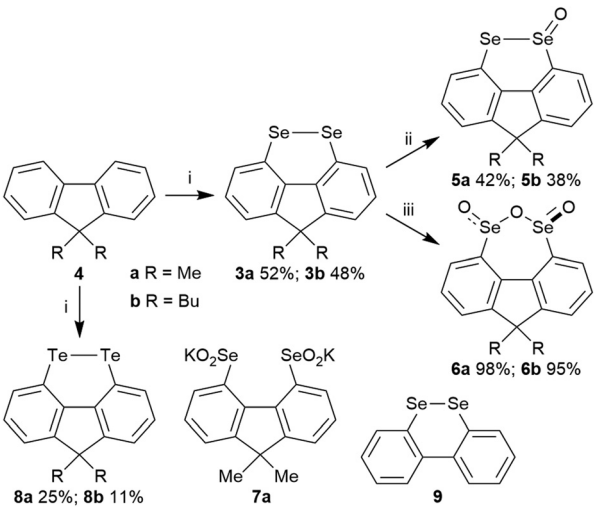
† Electronic supplementary information (ESI) available: Experimental procedures and analytical data, copies of NMR spectra and X-ray crystallography for **3a** (CCDC 2099301) and **3b** (CCDC 1470801). For ESI and crystallographic data in CIF or other electronic format see DOI: 10.1039/d1ob02153b

tures, on the basis of the equivalent Me groups at C-9 in the ^{1}H and ^{13}C NMR of **6a.** Treatment of **6a** with KOH in CD_3OD formed the dipotassium salt of the bis-seleninic acid **7a**, evidenced by ^{77}Se NMR, which upon acidification returned the same stereoisomer **6a** in 86% yield, suggesting the *trans*-isomer is thermodynamic preferred. In contrast, naphthalenes **2** give mixtures of diastereomeric seleninic anhydrides in both selenium oxidation and in base-mediated ring-opening – acidification.[7,10] The ditellurides **8a** and **8b** were also prepared from fluorenes **4a** and **4b** using tellurium as the quench for the dilithio species.

The X-ray crystal structure of **3a** is shown in Fig. 2 and that of **3b** (four independent molecules in the unit cell) in the ESI (Fig S1–S5†).[11] In contrast to the essentially planar naphthalene diselenides **2a** and **2b** (C–Se–Se–C dihedral angle **2a:** −2.28(13),[12] **2b:** −1.50(7)[13]), diselenides **3** are non-planar (C4–Se1–Se2–C5 dihedral angle **3a** −41.35(12); **3b** average 42.3 (20)§) and cause a twist in the fluorene plane (C4–C11–C12–C5 dihedral angle **3a** −10.9(4); **3b** average 11.3(15)§).[14] This C–Se–Se–C dihedral angle is still much smaller than in the conformationally unconstrained diphenyl diselenide (85.4(2), −85.5 (3))[15] and in the less constrained biaryl diselenide, dibenzo[*c*, *e*][1,2]diselenine (**9**, Scheme 1) (59.0(3), −59.0(4), −57.0(4)).[16] The Se–Se bond length in **3b** is 2.34416(4) Å, shorter than naphthalene diselenides **2a** (2.3639(5) Å) and **2b** (2.3552(3) Å), but longer than in diphenyl diselenide (2.3066(7) Å; 2.3073(10) Å) and **9** (mean length 2.323(2) Å).

The GPx-like catalytic activities of diselenides **3**, selenolseleninates **5**, seleninic anhydrides **6** and ditellurides **8** were determined using Iwoka's NMR assay,[17] which monitors the drop in concentration of dithiotheritol (**DTT^{red}**) as it is oxidized to the disulfide **DTT^{ox}** over time (Fig. 3). A solvent system of 2 : 1 CD_3OD : $CDCl_3$ was used to maintain solubility of all com-



Scheme 1 Synthesis of 4,5-disubstituted fluorene diselenides **3**, selenolseleninates **5**, seleninic anhydrides **6** and ditellurides **8**, and structures of dipotassium salt of bis-seleninic acid **7a** and related biaryl diselenide **9**. Reagents and conditions: (i) *n*-BuLi (4 equiv.), TMEDA (4 equiv.), 60 °C, 4 h, then Se or Te (8 equiv.), THF, −78 °C–rt. (ii) *m*CPBA (1.2 equiv.), Et_2O, 15 min. (iii) *m*CPBA (3.5 equiv.), Et_2O, 15 min.

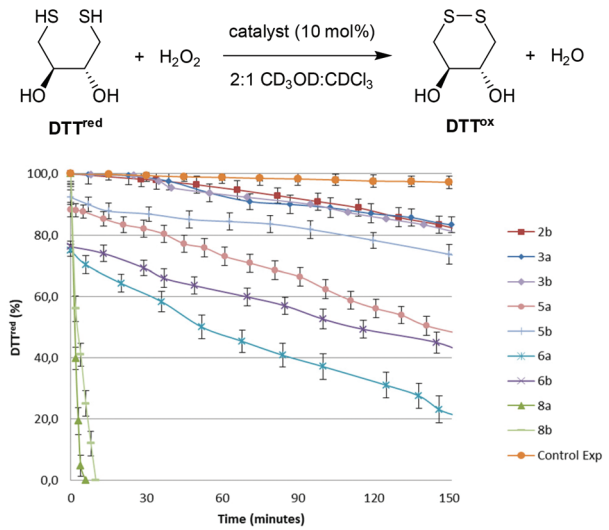


Fig. 3 Oxidation of **DTT^{red}** with H_2O_2 in the presence of selenium- or tellurium-containing catalysts (10 mol%). Reaction conditions: [**DTT^{red}**]^0 = 0.14 M, $[H_2O_2]^0$ = 0.14 M, [catalyst] = 0.014 M, 2 : 1 $CD_3OD/CDCl_3$ solution (0.6 mL). Reaction progress monitored by ^{1}H NMR. The mean (±) SD values of three separate experiments are reported.

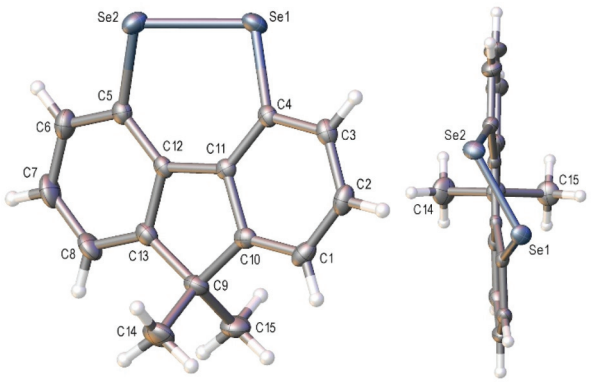


Fig. 2 Two views of the crystal structure of diselenide **3a** with ellipsoids drawn at the 50% probability level.

Table 1 GPx-like activity of chalcogen-containing catalysts

Entry	Catalyst	Initial **DDT^{red}** [a] (%)	T_{50} [b] (min)
1	**2b**	100	>300
2	**3a**	100	>300
3	**3b**	100	>300
4	**5a**	88	141 (±9)[c]
5	**5b**	92	253 (±17)
6	**6a**	75	52 (±8)
7	**6b**	75	105 (±11)
8	**8a**	100	<3
9	**8b**	100	<3

[a] After addition of 10 mol% catalyst before addition of H_2O_2. [b] T_{50} is the time required to halve the initial thiol concentration after the addition of H_2O_2. [c] Data in parenthesis are the experimental error.

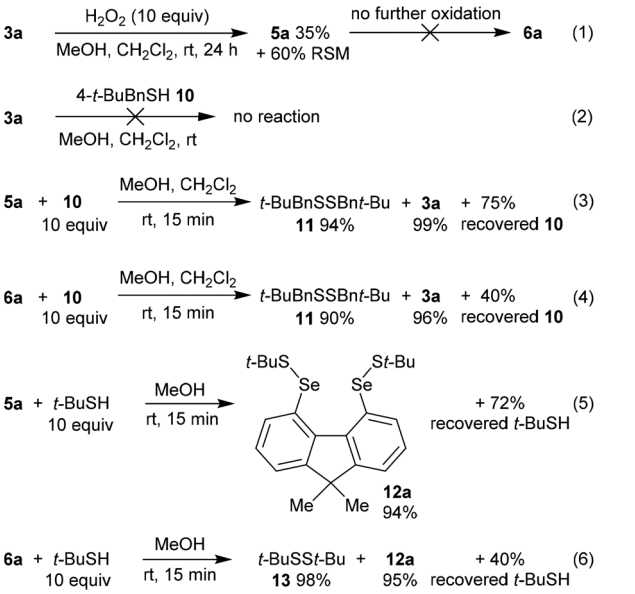
ponents and hence compare catalytic activity under homogenous conditions, although rates in this solvent system are much slower than in the original report of D_2O.[18] The times taken for the initial concentration of $\mathbf{DTT^{red}}$ to halve (T_{50}), after addition of H_2O_2 are shown in Table 1. T_{50} allows catalysts to be compared where there is a rapid initial reaction, as is the case herein for selenolseleninates and seleninic anhydrides, prior to addition of H_2O_2. Back's naphthalene diselenide **2b**, wherein the electron-donating *ortho*-OMe groups were shown to increase catalytic activity over the non-substituted **2a**, was also included, along with a background reaction (no catalyst).

All of the selenium- and tellurium-containing compounds **3**, **5**, **6** and **8** catalyse the oxidation of $\mathbf{DTT^{red}}$ to $\mathbf{DTT^{ox}}$. Diselenides **3** have comparable activities to the naphthalene diselenide **2b** in this assay, despite lacking activating *ortho*-OMe substituents (Fig. 1 and Table 1, entries 1–3). The selenolseleninates **5** have shorter T_{50} than the corresponding diselenides **3** (Table 1, entries 4 and 5). Before adding H_2O_2, approximately 10% of $\mathbf{DTT^{ox}}$ was detected, pointing to an initial fast reaction that occurs prior to the first NMR reading under these homogenous conditions. A more extensive initial reaction occurs with trioxides **6**, with approx. 25% $\mathbf{DTT^{ox}}$ detected, contributing to the overall shorter T_{50} (entries 6 and 7). In general, 9,9-dimethyl-substituted fluorenes catalyse the oxidation of $\mathbf{DTT^{red}}$ faster than the butyl-substituted systems (compare entries 4 *vs.* 5, and entries 6 *vs.* 7). Oxidation using ditellurides **8a** and **8b** is two orders of magnitude faster that the corresponding diselenides **3a** and **3b** (entries 8 and 9), with reactions complete within minutes of adding H_2O_2.[19]

In order to gain further mechanistic insight into the catalytic cycle, stoichiometric reactions of selenium-containing catalysts were carried out (Scheme 2). Treatment of diselenide **3a** with a large excess (10 equiv.) of H_2O_2 in 2 : 1 MeOH : CH_2Cl_2 at room temperature gave slow oxidation to monoxide **5a** (Scheme 2, eqn (1)). No higher oxides were detected, and independent treatment of selenolseleninate **5a** or seleninic anhydride **6a** with H_2O_2 under these conditions gave no reaction, suggesting **6a** is not an intermediate in the catalytic cycle.[20]

Diselenide **3a** does not react with (4-(*tert*-butyl)phenyl) methanethiol (**10**)[21] in CH_2Cl_2/MeOH at room temperature (Scheme 2, eqn (2)). However reaction of selenolseleninate **5a** with 10 equivalents of **10** gave an essentially instantaneous and quantitative transformation to diselenide **3a** and disulfide **11** along with 75% recovered thiol **10**, (eqn (3)). Under the same conditions, seleninic anhydride **6a** underwent a similarly rapid and high-yielding transformation to **3a** and **11** (eqn (4)), where the 90% yield of **11** is based on theoretical consumption of 6 molar equivalents of thiol **10** (stoichiometries in the reactions of **5a** and **6a** with thiols are shown in the ESI, Scheme S1†).

No intermediate bis-selenium species were observed in the reactions of **5a** and **6a** with thiol **10**. However, reaction of **5a** with the bulkier thiol, *t*-BuSH, gave the bis-selenenyl sulfide **12a** (Scheme 2, eqn (5)), a potential intermediate in the formation of **3a**. Indeed, isolated **12a** is slowly transformed over 24 h in

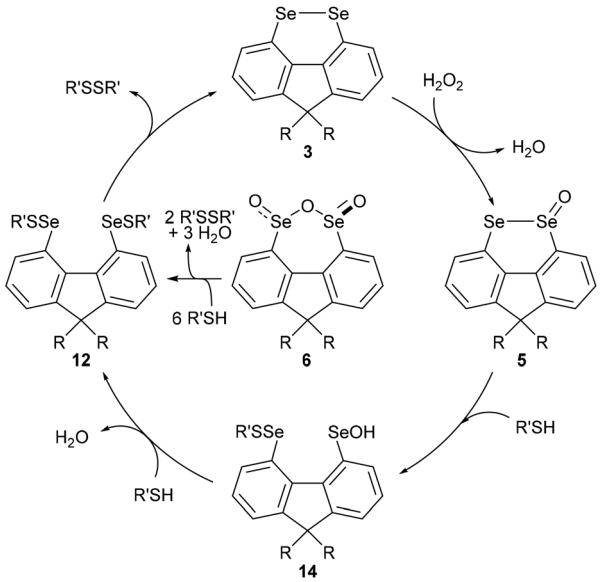


Scheme 2 Mechanistic investigations. % yields of recovered thiol are based on theoretical consumption.

solution to diselenide **3a** and di-*tert*-butyl disulfide (**13**). This rate of this reaction is not changed by addition of 3 equivalents of thiol **10**, and no disulfides derived from **10** were formed, only **13.** The breakdown of bis-selenenyl sulfide **12a** to diselenide **3a** and disulfide **13** is thus presumably intramolecular, but given the steric hindrance provided by the *t*-Bu group, care should be taken in extrapolating these observations to all thiols. Kice reported a similar reaction of *t*-BuSH with the monoxides of naphthalene diselenide **2a** to give isolable 1,8-bis[(*tert*-butylthio) seleno]naphthalene,[10] which led Back to propose bis-selenenyl sulfides as intermediates in the catalytic cycle of **2b**.[7]

The reaction of seleninic anhydride **6a** with *t*-BuSH also gave bis-selenenyl sulfide **12a** (Scheme 2, eqn (6)), though clearly there are multiple potential intermediates preceding its formation. These intermediates account for the formation of disulfide **13** (98% based on theoretical amount of *t*-BuSH consumed and consistent with recovery of 4 equivalents of thiol, Scheme S1†), not observed in the reaction of selenolseleninate **5a** with *t*-BuSH.¶

Based on the above observations, a catalytic cycle directly analogous to that proposed by Back for naphthalene diselenides **2** is suggested[7] (Scheme 3): this cycle is mechanistically distinct from catalysis by other diselenides, which involve initial Se–Se bond cleavage by reaction with thiols.[22] The rate-determining step is the oxidation of diselenide **3** to selenolseleninate **5**, which in turn rapidly consumes two equivalents of thiol and forms disulfides *via* the intermediates **14** (not observed) and **12** (observed as **12a** for R = Me, R′ = *t*-Bu). As noted above, the conversion of **12** to **3** may occur by more than one mechanism and may also be catalysed by thiol: this step is severely slowed in the case of R′ = *t*-Bu where nucleophilic attack at sulfur is restricted and where an intramolecular mechanism appears most likely. Oxides **5** and **6** initially circumvent the rate-determining oxidation, resulting in overall



Scheme 3 Proposed catalytic cycle for oxidation of thiols to disulfides.

shorter T_{50} in the **DDT** NMR assay. The initial rapid reaction of **5** and **6** with $\mathbf{DTT^{red}}$ is evident in Fig. 3. Consumption of 1 equivalent of dithiol $\mathbf{DTT^{red}}$ (2 × SH) with the 10 mol% of catalysts **5a** and **5b** present at the start of the assay should lead to an immediate 10% reduction in the amount of $\mathbf{DTT^{red}}$, which is consistent with the approx. 10% observed initial $\mathbf{DTT^{red}}$ (Table 1, entries 4 and 5). Similarly, rapid consumption of 3 equivalents of $\mathbf{DDT^{red}}$ (6 × SH) with the starting 10 mol% of catalysts **5a** and **5b** should give a theoretical 30% reduction in the amount of $\mathbf{DDT^{red}}$, with approx. 25% reduction observed in practice (entries 6 and 7).

Conclusions

In conclusion, readily synthesized, bay-substituted 4,5-fluorene diselenides **3** possess properties analogous to *peri*-substituted 1,8-naphthalenes **2**, including increased GPx-like activity compared with non-conformationally constrained diselenides. Despite a greater twist in the diselenide bond, the catalytic activity of fluorenes **3a** and **3b** is similar to that of naphthalene **2b** in a homogenous **DDT** redox assay, without the need for additional activation by *ortho*-OMe groups on the aromatic rings. Moving forward, the fluorene scaffold is particularly amenable to structural variation through incorporation of different functionality at C-9, for example towards water-soluble GPx mimics,[18,23] and the close proximity of groups in the 4,5-bay positions may be exploited in other applications based on 1,8-*peri*-substituted naphthalenes.[24,25]

Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts to declare.

Acknowledgements

We thank EPSRC (EP/K039245/1) for funding.

Notes and references

‡ Aryl selenides are less toxic than alkyl selenides. See ref. 3*a*.
§ For **3b** the average value calculated from molecules **1–3** for each parameter is given (see ESI†).
¶ Ph_3CSH and 1-adamantylthiol gave the corresponding disulfide and diselenide **3a** directly from **6a** (see ESI†).

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