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2/23/16

A.P. English Language and Composition

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**Macbeth Act One Questions**

**Scene One:**

A paradox is a statement that is ostensibly self-contradictory but may contain a hidden truth. In the first act, after discussing their plan to accost Macbeth, the witches conclude their conversation by chanting, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (I.i.11) in unison. This statement is paradoxical because “fair” and “foul” are typically seen as opposites, but the witches equate them since they perceive pleasant weather and moral actions as being foul and evil actions as being fair. In addition to highlighting the witches’ twisted mindsets, this statement also manifests the theme of appearance vs. reality: what may appear to be fair could actually be foul, and vice versa, which means that appearances can be deceiving. When returning to King Duncan’s camp following a battle against Irish invaders, Macbeth remarks, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (I.iii.38). This statement is paradoxical because days are usually foul or fair, but not both; in this case, Macbeth’s day is “foul” (I.iii.38) because of the inclement weather and “fair” (I.iii.38) because he won the battle. This use of paradox emphasizes the day’s deceptive nature: while King Duncan’s forces have won the battle, the viewer feels unease because Scotland is still in a state of disorder and Macbeth’s presumably deleterious actions later in the play will engender even more chaos.

**Scene Two:**

When speaking about the initial state of the battle between the Scottish government and the rebel Macdonwald, the Sergeant says, “Doubtful it stood; As two spent swimmers, that do cling together / And choke their art” (I.ii.8-9). The Sergeant compares the two opposing armies to “spent swimmers” (I.ii.8) because he wants to convey that both armies hindered each other’s movements (similar to two swimmers clasping one another during a race), thereby rendering one another exhausted and the battle undecided (or “doubtful” (I.ii.8)), at least at first. After describing how Macbeth valiantly kills Macdonwald, the Sergeant notes, “As whence the sun ’gins his reflection / Shipwracking storms and direful thunders break, / So from that spring whence comfort seem’d to come / Discomfort swells” (I.ii.25-28). The Sergeant effectively compares the Sun gaining its reflection, or the arrival of springtime, to Macbeth’s killing Macdonwald and likens the onset of harsh storms and thunders to the replenishment of Macdonwald’s army’s soldiers and armaments. The Sergeant uses this simile to demonstrate that the interruption of Macbeth’s brief victory (killing Macdonwald) by the Norwegians’ “fresh assault” (I.ii.33) against Macbeth’s army is akin to outbreak of stormy weather during spring. The Sergeant shows that Macbeth’s feeling of victory after having killed Macdonwald changes to dread when the Norwegians (Macdonwald’s allies) gain additional supplies and launch a new attack. The Sergeant replies that this “fresh assault” (I.ii.33) deters Macbeth and Banquo as much as “sparrows [do] eagles” (I.iii.35). In this statement, the Sergeant compares Macdonwald’s rebel army to a sparrow facing an eagle that represents Macbeth’s army. By drawing this comparison, the Sergeant conveys that this new attack does not frighten Macbeth or Banquo because they are far more powerful than Macdonwald’s Norwegian allies.