Act II, Scene iii

Court of Macbeth's castle

Knocking within

Enter a PORTER

PORTER

Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the key.

Knock, knock, knock! Who's there, i' th' name of Beelzebub? Here's a farmer that hang'd himself on the expectation of plenty. Come in time. Have napkins enough about you. Here you'll sweat for't.

Shakespeare's tragedies typically include scatterings or full scenes of comic relief. This might come as a curiosity to readers or viewers who expect the language and action of a tragedy to be mainly sad, often dangerous, and exclusively serious. But Shakespeare incorporates comic material with good reason in his tragedies. In Macbeth, the Porter's speech, coming on the heels of Macbeth's murder of Duncan, substantially changes, if only temporarily, the mood and rhythm of the play's action. What, in the content of the lines, was dark and dreadful is now light and harmless (on the surface, that is). What was slow and careful is now brisk and casual (though fraught). And the same effects carry over into the dialogue following the Porter's speech. Generally, these moments bring variety to the play. They make a shift from action that would otherwise be unreliedly heavy with fear and malice to action that is light and allows us to breathe easily. More importantly, though, the appearance of this unexpected lightness actually intensifies the darkness of action on either side—the before and after—of the scene. For in this, as in many situations, we understand a condition or quality better when we see it set in contrast to its opposite. Black seems blacker when juxtaposed with white; the bottom is lower when contrasted with the top; evil is more hellish when heaven is seen next to it.

The fact that the porter is responding to a knocking at the gate (emphasized, too, by his repetition of the word "knock") reminds us of a key idea in the play—that of evil and goodness vying, as it were, for our attention, each hoping to persuade us to act on its side.

"Here's a knocking indeed" = The Porter, whose office is to open the castle door and receive visitors, enters the courtyard, probably hung over, possibly still drunk, from the celebrations attending the king's visit.

"If a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the key" = While answering this earthly door, the Porter imagines performing the same function at the gate of hell, and supposes that the gatekeeper there would have no end of arrivals to take care of ("he should have old turning the key"). But a dramatic irony is apparent in the Porter's statement, for Inverness has, by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's assassination of Duncan, become indeed a kind of hell, and this porter, without knowing it, has become, in a sense, an actual porter of hell-gate.

"Here's a farmer who hang'd himself on the expectation of plenty" = The Porter now pretends to be the very porter of hell-gate and imagines the identity of the person knocking for admittance. This one, he imagines, is a farmer who hoarded his produce against a time when food would be scarce, expecting that he would be able to sell it in that future time at an inflated price and make an extraordinary profit. But the famine he hoped for did not happen, his moneymaking scheme fell apart, and in his despair he committed suicide. Macbeth and his lady are like the farmer, in that they expect to gain much by their immoral plan but in the end are ruined by it.

"napkins" = handkerchiefs (to wipe away sweat caused by the heat of hell)
Knocking within

Knock, knock! Who's there, in the other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. O come in, equivocator.

Knocking within

Knock, knock, knock! Who's there? Faith, here's an English tailor come hither for stealing out of a French hose. Come in, tailor. Here you may roast your goose.

Knocking within

Knock, knock! Never at quiet! What are you? But this place is too cold for hell. I'll devil-porter it no further. I had thought to have let in some of all professions that go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire.

Knocking within

Anon, anon! I pray you, remember the porter.

Opens the gate

"Faith, here's an equivocator . . . who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven" = by my faith, here comes one who "[lied] like truth" but still could not deceive God (one who seemed to be honest, who could even argue that his words or his actions, viewed from the right vantage, were honest, and yet was still a liar). Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are equivocators by virtue of their false faces, but, as we shall see, Macbeth becomes a fairly skilled speaker of equivocations too.

Be aware that Shakespeare's reference to the "equivocator" may be more pointed than a mere reference to anyone who deceives by doubletalk. He may be referring specifically to doctrines of the Jesuit brotherhood (an order of monks and priests in the Roman Catholic Church)—namely the doctrine of mental reservation and the closely related doctrine of equivocation, which held that certain forms of lying could be considered morally defensible. For details on these concepts, click on the following link:


"Faith, here's an English tailor come hither for stealing out of a French hose" = French hose (breeches) were tight-fitting. It would be difficult, therefore, for a tailor to steal cloth from them. The one who attempted such a theft would almost certainly be caught. Similarly, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth should not have expected, in the first place, to get away with their crime. They are bound to be caught and punished eventually—if not in this life, then the next. As well, the reference here suits with the play's motif of ill-fitting garments.

"roast your goose" = There are at least three possible readings of this line. One is that the "goose" here refers to a tailor's smoothing iron, which would have to be heated ("roasted") in order for it to work properly. Another use of "goose" is for a swelling caused by a venereal disease. Yet another possibility is that the "goose" is a reference to killing the goose that laid the golden egg, which is similar to a tailor (as well as an equivocator and a farmer, for that matter) who ruins himself in the attempt to gain advantage.

"this place is too cold for hell" = Though according to Dante, in The Divine Comedy, there is a cold location in hell too. It is the Ninth, or frozen, Circle of hell, and it is a place reserved for those who, in their mortal lives, have been traitors—the circle, then, to which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth would be consigned.

"I'll devil-porter it no further" = I'll play this part no more

"the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire" = A popular metaphor asserts that the road to heaven is a hard road—twisting and narrow, with many stones to stumble on, and uphill all the way. Going to hell, however, is much easier, and the road—straight and wide, gently sloping downward, and lined with lovely flowers ("primroses," for instance)—is most pleasant.

"Anon, anon! I pray you, remember the porter" = I'm coming at once! I insist ("I pray you"). don't forget to pay me a tip ("remember" me)

We might say that Shakespeare himself is speaking a little equivocally in this line. Mainly, the porter is speaking in apostrophe to whoever is knocking at the gate (Macduff and Lennox), declaring that he expects to be rewarded for his service. In symbolic terms, however, the line is addressed directly to us. That is to say, in this moment the porter can be heard as Shakespeare's mouthpiece (a case of two voices speaking from the same opening, which, you will recall from the witches with their hushing gesture, is an image of equivocation). In effect, the porter is also the playwright saying to us, You who think yourself so good and so bound for heaven when you die, don't be surprised to find yourself at the doorway to hell and this funny little man welcoming you in! For this is your reward!

With this reading in mind, we are reminded of the idea of culpability. In a sense, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are not the only culprits, for you and I have participated in the crime with them.
"Was it so late, friend, ere you went to bed, / That you do lie so late?" = Was it so late before ("ere") you went to bed that you sleep in ("lie") so late? The fact that the verb "lie" can refer both to sleeping and to telling falsehoods becomes relevant with the entrance of Macbeth in a moment.

"carousing till the second cock" = drinking and making merry ("carousing") till the second crowing of the rooster (about 3:00 a.m.). There is a pun, as well, in the word "cock." It refers, in the Porter's line, to the rooster, of course, but the word is also used vulgarly to refer to the penis, which also becomes relevant in a moment.

"drink, sir, is a great provoker of three things" = alcohol causes three significant effects

"Marry" = by the Virgin Mary (a mild swear word)

"nose-painting, sleep, and urine" = Alcohol causes its drinker to obtain a red nose (as though it had been painted), to pass out (sleep), and to pee.

"Lechery" = sexual desire

"It makes him, and it mars him" = gives him success ("makes him"—in the sense that it gives him the confidence to take a risk), and it ruins him ("mars him"). Alcohol is like the hemlock or henbane ("the insane root") mentioned earlier by Banquo. It is a drug that provides a momentary thrill and may even induce a grand vision, but it's still a poison. Similarly, alcohol may make a man feel momentarily energized and bold, but it impairs his judgment. It is a depressant that saps his energy, weakens his will, and leaves him the next morning with a hangover. What drinking gives the drinker is far less than what it takes away. The Porter's statement about alcohol's effects is, however, a bit bawdier than this. When he says "it sets [a man] on and it takes him off, it persuades him and disheartens him, makes him stand to, and not stand to," he means that "drink" makes a man lusty, but ironically it also makes it difficult for him to achieve an erection. This is, metaphorically, the effect that the witches' enticements and Lady Macbeth's persuasions have had on Macbeth. Again, however, let's not forget that Macbeth is the one who chooses to drink from the "poison'd chalice" that is offered to him. He is the designer of his own destiny.

Recall, too, that these effects of alcohol square with Lady Macbeth's having accused Macbeth of being a coward, saying he is like a fool who has been brave in his drunkenness but wakes hang-over in the morning, regretting what he did and wishing he could undo it.

"and giving him the lie, leaves him" = Here again is the pun on "lie," Alcohol "[gives] him the lie" in that it causes him to pass out and lie down. And it lies to him by promising him a reward on which it does not deliver.

"gave thee the lie last night" = made you fall down and/or pass out

"That it did, sir, ’t very throat on me' = yes, it put the lie in my throat (because I poured it into my throat)

"required him for his lie" = paid him back ("required" him) for his mean trick (the lie)

"though he took up my legs sometime, yet I made a shift to cast him" = The struggle of the Porter with the alcohol is depicted in terms of wrestling. The phrase "took up my legs sometime" means that the alcohol at one point knocked him down. The clause "yet I made a shift to cast him" means that the Porter, in turn, managed ("made a shift") to throw down ("cast") the alcohol by peeing or puking.
MACDUFF
Is thy master stirring?

Enter MACBETH

Our knocking has awak'd him. Here he comes.

LENNOX
Good morrow, noble sir.

MACBETH
Good morrow, both.

MACDUFF
Is the king stirring, worthy thane?

MACBETH
Not yet.

MACDUFF
He did command me to call timely on him. I have almost slipp'd the hour.

MACBETH
I'll bring you to him.

MACDUFF
I know this is a joyful trouble to you, But yet 'tis one.

MACBETH
The labor we delight in physics pain. This is the door.

MACDUFF
I'll make so bold to call, For 'tis my limited service.

Exit

LENNOX
Goes the king hence to day?

MACBETH
He does. He did appoint so.
LENNOX
The night has been unruly. Where we lay,
Our chimney’s were blown down, and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i’ th’ air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confus’d events
New-hatch’d to the woeful time. The obscure bird
Clamor’d the livelong night. Some say the earth
Was feverous and did shake.

MACBETH
’Twas a rough night.

LENNOX
My young remembrance cannot parallel
A fellow to it.

Re-enter MACDUFF

MACDUFF
O horror, horror, horror!
Tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name thee!

MACBETH and LENNOX
What’s the matter?

MACDUFF
Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!
Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope
The Lord’s anointed temple and stole thence
The life o’ th’ building!

MACBETH
What is ’t you say? The life?
LENNOX

Mean you his majesty?

MACDUFF

Approach the chamber and destroy your sight
With a new Gorgon. Do not bid me speak.
See and then speak yourselves.

*Exeunt MACBETH and LENNOX*

Awake! Awake!
Ring the alarum-bell. Murder and treason!
Banquo and Donalbain! Malcolm! Awake!
Shake off this downy sleep, death's counterfeit,
And look on death itself! Up, up, and see
The great doom's image! Malcolm! Banquo!
As from your graves rise up and walk like sprites,
To countenance this horror!

Bell rings

*Enter LADY MACBETH*

LADY MACBETH

What's the business,
That such a hideous trumpet calls to parley
The sleepers of the house? Speak! Speak!

MACDUFF

'O gentle lady,
'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak.
The repetition in a woman's ear
Would murder as it fell.

*Enter BANQUO*

O Banquo, Banquo,
Our royal master's murder'd!

LADY MACBETH

Woe, alas!
What, in our house?

BANQUO

Too cruel anywhere.
Dear Duff, I prithee, contradict thyself,
And say it is not so.
Re-enter MACBETH and LENNOX

MACBETH
Had I but died an hour before this chance, I had liv'd a blessed time, for from this instant There's nothing serious in mortality. All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead. The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees Is left this vault to brag of.

Enter MALCOLM and DONALBAIN

DONALBAIN
What is amiss?

MACBETH
You are and do not know't. The spring, the head, the fountain of your blood Is stopp'd. The very source of it is stopp'd.

MACDUFF
Your royal father's murder'd.

MALCOLM
O! By whom?

LENNOX
Those of his chamber, as it seem'd, had done 't. Their hands and faces were all badg'd with blood. So were their daggers, which, unwip'd, we found Upon their pillows. They star'd, and were distracted. No man's life was to be trusted with them.

"Had I but died an hour before this chance, / I had liv'd a blessed time" = if only I had died an hour before this happening ("chance"). I could've called my life complete and happy

"instant" = moment

"There's nothing serious in mortality" = nothing in life ("mortality") has any significance (with Duncan dead)

"All is but toys" = everything in life (even something I would have, until this time, called precious) is worth no more than a toy (or, as Malcolm calls it in Act I, a "careless trifle")

"drawn" = either selected (from a set of bottles) or poured out (from one bottle or cask)

"the mere lees / Is left this vault to brag of" = Macbeth compares the world to a wine cellar ("vault") from which the best wine has been drawn, and the cellar can now boast ("brag") only of the dregs or worthless leftovers ("lees").

Here it is worth wondering just what kind of false face Macbeth is presenting? Is he merely making his feigned "griefs and clamors roar," in accordance with Lady Macbeth's plan—simply putting on a pretense of despair at the death of Duncan? Or is he—while, yes, putting on a show of sorrow for Duncan—speaking words that he believes, speaking seriously of what life has become for him now that he has "done the deed"?

"badg'd" = Lennox compares the blood smears on the grooms' bodies to badges of the sort that professionals would wear to advertise their credentials (the "professionals," in this case, being murderers).
MACBETH
O, yet I do repent me of my fury,
That I did kill them.

MACDUFF
Wherefore did you so?

MACBETH
Who can be wise, amaz'd, temperate and furious,
Loyal and neutral, in a moment? No man.
Th' expedition of my violent love
Outrun the pauser, reason. Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood.
And his gash'd stabs look'd like a breach in nature
For ruin's wasteful entrance. There, the murderers,
Steep'd in the colors of their trade, their daggers
Unmannerly breech'd with gore. Who could refrain,
That had a heart to love, and, in that heart,
Courage to make's love known?

"I do repent me of my fury" = I regret what I did impetuously in my anger. Macbeth reveals that, while he and Lennox had gone to the chamber to see Duncan's body, he slew the "guilty" grooms.

"Wherefore did you so? = Why did you do that?"

Macduff's being the first thane to question the wisdom of Macbeth's action is, as we shall learn, important. As Macduff and other sensible people would know, due process calls for an investigation—a questioning of the chamberlains, a general gathering of evidence, and, beyond that, a carrying out of appropriate justice. But Macbeth has beaten justice to the punch, for he serves in "one fell swoop" as judge, jury, and executioner. His response to Macduff's question sees him having to think quickly to generate a plausible excuse, the thrust of which becomes that strong emotion overtook him and that he acted as his love for, and duty to, Duncan required him: to requite the murder without delay. As for the actual "wherefore"—Macbeth slays the grooms not just because doing so will appear to demonstrate his love for Duncan but because it will prevent the grooms from presenting any testimony that would put their culpability in question and so cause an investigation to lead back to Macbeth.

"amaz'd" = shocked; disgusted
"temperate" = emotionally restrained
"neutral" = unemotional
"in a moment" = at the same time
"Who can be wise [and] amaz'd, temperate and furious, / Loyal and neutral" = Note here a set of three (that witchy number again) antithetical pairings—an antithesis being a phrase built on what we might call an even-handed contrast (even-handed in both form and content).

"expedition" = carrying out
"violent love" = By this oxymoron (itself a neat little package of fair-and-foul), Macbeth says that his love for Duncan called for a violent response.

"Outrun the pauser, reason" = He says that his "violent love" ran faster (acted sooner) than his intellect ("reason") could. In other circumstances, reason might have persuaded him to pause before acting on emotion. And we should observe here that this idea—of applying reason in order to keep negative emotion under control—is one that Shakespeare strongly endorses in his plays. If humans are the halfway beings between angels and beasts, then reason is the faculty that must draw us nearer to our heavenly nature (toward angels and order), while negative emotion is the force that will pull us down to the level of animals (then to the level of demons and disorder). We will find more made of this idea as Macbeth progresses—in particular the experience of evil as a force that acts entirely on impulse, blindly, void of reason.

"His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood" = his pale skin ("silver skin"—paler, not darkness, was regarded in Shakespeare's age as a feature of physical beauty in both males and females; as well, silver, being a precious metal, is an apt descriptor for the appearance of a beloved king's skin) covered in lace-like lines of royal ("golden") blood. Notice the blended foulness and fairness in the comparison of bloody trails on skin to delicate lacework.

"And his gash'd stabs look'd like a breach in nature / For ruin's wasteful entrance" = the rips in his skin (the viciousness of the murder is emphasized by adding the adjective "gash'd" to the noun "stabs") seemed like a horrid break ("breach"—disruption or opening) in that which we call natural and good ("nature" itself), and the "breach" (the "gash'd stabs") being the opening by which evil ("ruin" itself) might enter and lay waste to nature ("nature" and "ruin" stand in juxtaposition)

"Steep'd in the colors of their trade" = soaked ("steep'd") in blood (red, the color emblematic of the "professional" murderer)

"Unmannerly breech'd with gore" = This "breech" is different from, but related to, the "breach" in the earlier line. Breeches are trousers. The relation to "breech" (an opening, disruption, or break) is that the garment (a pair of breeches) is seen as having a break (the two legs) as opposed to being a single enclosing garment, as a dress or robe is. The phrase "unmannerly breech'd with gore," which means rudely dressed with blood, emphasizes, in a pun, the earlier idea that the sight itself is a "breach in nature" and is another appearance of the clothing motif.

"to make's love known" = to make his love apparent
LADY MACBETH
Help me hence, ho!

MACDUFF
Look to the lady.

MALCOLM
[Aside to DONALBAIN] Why do we hold our tongues, that most may claim
This argument for ours?

DONALBAIN
[Aside to MALCOLM] What should be spoken
Here, where our fate, hid in an auger-hole,
May rush and seize us? Let's away.
Our tears are not yet brew'd.

MALCOLM
[Aside to DONALBAIN] Nor our strong sorrow
Upon the foot of motion.

BANQUO
Look to the lady.

LADY MACBETH is carried out

And when we have our naked frailties hid,
That suffer in exposure, let us meet,
And question this most bloody piece of work,
To know it further. Fears and scruples shake us.
In the great hand of God I stand, and thence
Against the undivulg'd pretence I fight
Of treasonous malice.

MACDUFF
And so do I.

ALL
So all.

MACBETH
Let's briefly put on manly readiness,
And meet i' th' hall together.
ALL

Well contented.

Exeunt all but MALCOLM and DONALBAIN

MALCOLM
What will you do? Let's not consort with them.
To show an unfelt sorrow is an office
Which the false man does easy. I'll to England.

DONALBAIN
To Ireland, I. Our separated fortune
Shall keep us both the safer. Where we are,
There's daggers in men's smiles. The near in blood,
The nearer bloody.

MALCOLM
This murderous shaft that's shot
Hath not yet lighted, and our safest way
Is to avoid the aim. Therefore, to horse.
And let us not be dainty of leave-taking,
But shift away. There's warrant in that theft
Which steals itself, when there's no mercy left.

Exeunt

"consort with them" = be in their company
"There's daggers in men's smiles" = The sense of this metaphor is that no one—not even those who smile and appear to be friends—can be trusted.
"The near in blood, / The nearer bloody" = Considering that Macbeth was an actual cousin of Duncan (not just a general kinsman) Donalbain's line here appears to be an almost fully voiced suspicion of Macbeth. The sense of his statement is that the closer our relationship is to him, the more likely he is to murder us.
"shaft" = arrow
"lighted" = hit its target
"This murderous shaft that's shot / Hath not yet lighted" = the killing arrow (that has killed our father) is still in flight (and heading toward us)
"dainty" = particular
"shift away" = slip away
"warrant" = justification (in this case, justification for theft, which is not normally justified). The "theft" that Malcolm speaks of is based on a pun on the word "steals," for the word steal, while it means to unlawfully take someone else's property, can also mean to sneak away. Malcolm and Donalbain's "stealing" (their sneaking away) is, therefore, a "theft" for which there is good "warrant."