Alfred Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” is the sort of work Victorians might have turned to for reassurance. It provides the reader with a soothing, predictable space/world, wherein s/he is well prepared to encounter and process the New. There is disequilibrium in the poem: Lancelot is described as such an unusual, affecting sight that his appearance shocks the Lady of Shalott (hereafter, “Lady”) into activating the curse. However, the Lady’s subsequent activity is equal to and nullifies his emblazoned entrance, leaving us with an appropriate pairing: a gentle knight, amidst a newly becalmed realm.

The first stanza reassures us that throughout the poem, throughout the world it evokes, we will find ourselves well grounded in the familiar, the already known. We know that both “side[s]” (1) of the river have the same expansive “fields of barley and of rye” (2). Visual and auditory echoes of this pronouncement are found in the stanza’s first line: “river” is enclosed by “either” on one side, and by “lie” on the other. Throughout we find words within the same line which seem visually and/or audibly related. Sometimes the same word is repeated—“four” in line fifteen, for example. Sometimes we get overt, obvious assonance and/or alliteration—e.g., “surly village churls” (52). And sometimes we get visual rhymes—e.g., “weaveth steadily” (43). The result is that we do not simply progress as we read and, in effect, jettison the words already encountered in the line; rather, there is a sense that we are encouraged to read forward as we progress across a line, and backward as we reach its completion. That is, we are provided with some sense of the stable, eternal “medieval” present while we move our way through the poem.

The same sense of familiarity provided by seeing/hearing resemblances between words on single lines, is also enabled by re-encountering the same words throughout the poem. Nouns are frequently repeated, and so too many adjectives, including “little,” “broad,” and “bearded.” The repetition of these words again reinforces the poem’s stability and regularity, maintained most obviously by the repetition of the refrain, “The Lady of Shalott,” which terminates most all of the poem’s stanzas. There may be something very soothing, too, in discovering as we read antonyms of many previously encountered words. Without having seen “under” (102) before encountering “Over” (16), without having encountered “In” (29) before encountering
“Out (114), we might have lost some of the ease the poem provides by its seeming to offer us a comprehensive spatial survey of its world.

Since we are told both what is “up and down,” and what is “left and right” (137), after being told of the “stormy east wind” (118) that emerges with the activation of the curse, we might at some level be unsettled to learn that we never hear of what lies westward. But we would be looking in the wrong direction, so to speak, if we looked to the stanzas that delineate the Lady’s subsequent transformation for the poem’s discordant element. Instead, we must look to Lancelot. And how can we not? Unlike the poem’s “two” “knights” (61) and Camelot’s “four [. . .] towers” (15), that is, unlike other “objects” in the poem associated with medieval order and even numbers, Sir Lancelot is “One” (94) singular, irregular knight.

Sir Lancelot, though a knight, is described in a manner due a monarch. He is associated with the “sun” (163): he and/or his equipment is described as “flamed” (76) and “blazoned” (87). His equipment is also likened to “stars” (84), that is, to equally endowed objects in the night-sky. But he himself is imagined as a “meteor” (98), that is, to a singular object whose appearance in the night-sky cannot but command attention away from all else. The packed stresses of “broad clear brow” (100), “war-horse trode” (101), and “coal-black curls” (104), complement the meteor simile by making him seem energized, deliberate—the opposite of easeful. Unlike all other subjects the Lady espies in her mirror, he alone is given sustained attention—the rest are given but one or two accompanying adjectives. Sustained, too, is the sequence of “b” words used to describe him, such as “bow-shot” (73), “brazen” (76), and “blazoned” (87), which again emphasizes our understanding of him as bold, pronounced and dangerous.

The extensive description of Lancelot’s passage is followed by an equally extensive description of the Lady’s entrance into Camelot. And we note just how much the imagery involved in the Lady’s passage down the river counters that associated with Lancelot. He is associated with a sun which “blazed” (76), she with “pale yellow woods” (119). He is likened to a “meteor, trailing light” (98), she floats “down the river’s dim expanse” (127). His helmet is likened to a “flame” (94), her white clothing, to “snow” (136). In a sense, the Lady’s passage can be thought of as providing us with a “down” to his “up,” or with a “left” to his “right”—that is, with his natural complement. Lancelot and the Lady are made to seem similar opposites. Together, they are the harmony that comes when opposites unite.
The Lady’s entrance into Camelot spooks “All the knights at Camelot” (167), but Lancelot calms them down. No longer a man constituted by tightly packed energy, he instead seems easeful. This transformation is effected rhythmically, as he is no longer the man whose “war horse trode” (/ / /) but one who “mused a little space” (168) (/ / / / /). We also note that “God” and “grace” (170)—both stressed words—are used to bookend the poem’s second to last line: The poem terminates as it began, with peace throughout the land.

Work Cited