

# 15. Percy Bysshe Shelley

## Percy Bysshe Shelley

### *Ozymandias* (1818) 56

*Ozymandias* was the name of one of Egypt's most famous rulers, Ramses II (or Ramses the Great). He was born in c. 1303 B.C. and ruled Egypt for 66 years as the third king of the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. When he died, he was between 90 and 99 years old. Ramses was a warrior king and a builder of temples, statues and other monuments. Shelley was attracted by his great ambition to play 'God' (hubris); he completed these lines in 1817 and published them in England's *The Examiner* in 1818. The poem is a reflection on the vanity of all human aspirations and the fleetingness of life.

I met a traveller from an antique land<sup>1</sup>  
 Who said: 'Two vast and trunkless<sup>2</sup> legs of stone  
 Stand in the desert<sup>3</sup>. Near them, on the sand,  
 Half sunk, a shattered visage<sup>4</sup> lies, whose frown,  
 5 And wrinkled lip, and sneer<sup>5</sup> of cold command,  
 Tell that its sculptor well those passions read<sup>6</sup>  
 Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,  
 The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed<sup>7</sup>.  
 And on the pedestal these words appear –  
 10 "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:  
 Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"  
 Nothing beside remains. Round the decay  
 Of that colossal wreck<sup>8</sup>, boundless and bare  
 The lone and level sands stretch far away.'

1. **land:** Shelley has heard of an antique statue whose fragments were found in the Egyptian desert. He used this idea to meditate on human frailty
2. **trunkless:** it. *senza tronco*
3. **Stand in the desert:** The statue of Ozymandias (Ramses II) – a crumbling relic in Shelley's poem – was originally 57 feet high. The source Shelley used was Diodorus Siculus, a Greek historian from the 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., who wrote that an inscription on the statue told onlookers, 'I am Ozymandias, king of kings' and challenged them to perform greater works than he did

4. **Half sunk, a shattered visage:** it. *Mezzo sepolto, un volto fatto a pezzi*
5. **sneer:** it. *espressione di disprezzo*
6. **read:** understood
7. **The hand that ... fed:** it. *Le passioni bene conoscevano la mano che le derise e il cuore che le alimentò*
8. **wreck:** it. *relitto*