

THE EDITOR'S CORNER

Look on My Works, Ye Mighty, and Despair

The sonnet “Ozymandias” was published in 1818 by the British poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Ozymandias was the Greek name for the Pharaoh Ramses II, otherwise known as Ramses the Great, the most powerful ruler in ancient Egypt. In the poem, the narrator recounts meeting a traveler who has stumbled upon the decaying ruins of a half-sunken and trunkless statue of Ozymandias in the desert. On the pedestal of the statue, it reads: “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; / Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

This triumphant imperative, memorized by every high-school student who takes AP English Literature, is the most recognized line in the poem. Ozymandias is addressing any “Mighty” emperors who might approach, now or in the future. He dares others to look at the vast empire that he built and warns them to abandon any hope of trying to surpass it or to overthrow him. In Shelley’s poem, the intact and overawing statue of Ozymandias with its inscription is a metaphor for tyranny, power, and pride.

The command to “Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!” changes meaning during the passage of time between antiquity and Shelley’s account. The words on the pedestal become ironic because the “Works” of Ozymandias have all faded into the barren landscape. The crumbling statue reveals the truth: we are all subject to the ravages of time, and this inevitability is the real reason for despair. By the end of the poem, the ephemeral nature of power and human life becomes the moral.

Let’s apply these lessons of “Ozymandias” to orthodontics. Is our behavior that different from the pharaoh’s? We boast about our annual collections and case starts. We build satellite offices and Invisalign scan centers to control patient territory. We create business-minded study groups with

geo-exclusivity. We convince ourselves that we possess a greater understanding of orthodontic science and a unique skill set, compared to our rivals up the street. We roar, “Open a practice in my neighborhood, if you dare!”

“Ozymandias” teaches us the fallacy of such a competitive and domineering mindset, because in the grand scheme of life our career is so brief. Even the most successful orthodontists will eventually sell or retire; the same fate awaits those who have gained popularity on social media. Therefore, in my opinion, the only way to ensure lasting power or to leave a legacy in orthodontics is to work each day with humility, empathy, and encouragement of colleagues—that is to say, to live a life in opposition to the character of Ozymandias.

The poem concludes with a cautionary observation by the traveler: “Nothing beside remains. Round the decay / Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare / The lone and level sands stretch far away.” The proud achievements of Ozymandias have vanished, literally beneath the sands of time. The line’s enjambment (or continuation) brings the inscription into the present day, and the final lines become a warning to those in power to use their time well, as if to ask, “How do you want to be remembered?”

Shelley wrote “Ozymandias” in a friendly competition with fellow poet Horace Smith, who produced a sonnet on the same topic and with the same title. Shelley’s version became recognized as one of the greatest poems in the English language; Smith’s has been forgotten. Unfortunately, Shelley died when his boat capsized only a few years after the poem was published. In a case of life imitating art, when people mention the writer “Shelley” today, they are often referring to Percy’s wife, Mary, author of *Frankenstein*. Nothing lasts forever. NDK