# Ozymandias

## Analysis of Metrical Variations

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**Ozymandias**

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desart[1] … Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal these words appear:[2]
‘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, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Percy Bysshe Shelley
1817

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# Introduction

*Ozymandias* is brilliant! Yet it is not without its critics. There has been much debate over different aspects in this short poem. Is it a sonnet? Is it written in *iambic pentameter*? How do you pronounce *Ozymandias*? How many syllable are in *Ozymandias*? All these and other questions litter the Shelley table.

My purpose in this essay or paper, whatever you wish to call it, is to analyze each verse of the poem for metrical variations. I am not concerned with the content or what the poem is about, only the structure of the verses.

Throughout, I will using the term *metrical substitution* or just *substitution* to refer to an *iamb replaced by another metrical foot*. In some ways, this is quite misleading to the reader because the poet does not consciously substitute anything whatsoever. Indeed, the poet is not concerned with what metrical feet will appear, and generally they would have little if any interest in the business of *scansion*.

Poets write to a melody of some description. It is the *sound* of the poem as it is read, and provided the poet continues with their melody throughout, it will sound as it should. *Iambic pentameter* is one of those musical attributes of poetry. Thus it may well be possible that a poem *sounds* like *iambic pentameter*, but the construction of the verses show otherwise. This is what I am looking at.

When it came to writing, Shelley was quite free with his use of meter and rime to suit *what* he wanted to say, and *how* he wanted to say something. This is what a poet needs to do. As it was, he would generally revert to his natural writing style which involved many metrical variations.

Throughout this analysis, I will give my scansion of the verses. Whether you agree with me is entirely up to you, but I will support my argument by clearly demonstrating how these metrical feet combine to control the rhythm. Metrical accent, speech stress and reading speed will also be discussed where appropriate.

# Metrical Analyses

Each verse will be analyzed for metrical variations. An explanation for the my scansion will be given, along with some minor discussion on each verse.

# The Octave

## Verse 1

### *I met a traveller from an antique land*

An interesting verse to say the least with a number of possible variations to metrical accent, speech access and pronunciation.

> **Ĭ mēt | ă trāv | ĕllĕr frōm | ăn ān | tı̆q͡ue lānd**

The reader may also choose to start the verse with a trochee. Although this is possible, the reader needs to be able to carefully and quickly adjust the metrical accent going into the second foot.

> **Ī mĕt | ă trāv** | &c.

The choice will depend on what may be deemed as dramatic effect. Generally, the iambic start will be easier for the reader since it would be preferable for the emphasis to fall on *met*, but both are plausible.

Although there has been enormous discussion about the number of syllables in the name *Ozymandias*[3]. The first verse is frequently overlooked when considering the syllable count of the verses[4]. This is mostly due to how *traveller* is pronounced. Irrespective of the spelling (*traveler* or *traveller*), there are still three syllables. The general pronunciation is to effectively elide the second syllable resulting in *trav'ler* or *trav'ller*. However, as can be observed here, the word can remain as is without violating the rhythm of the verse or insisting on the elision.

*Traveller* does not appear in a single foot[5] as a dactyl, but takes on a common property of the anapest, being it uses the last two syllables and the first from the

next word. This allows the anapest to be successfully substituted for the iamb in any of the last four feet in an iambic pentameter verse. It also allows for the slightly faster reading than the iamb.

# Verse 2

## *Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone*

This verse has been printed a couple of ways depending on the editor. As to which is better may be a personal preference in the reading. It is an interesting verse because it introduces the *stranger from an antique land* whose dialogue continues until the end of the piece.

> **Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone** &c.

> **Who said — “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone** &c.

The second version introduces the quotation marks and dash to clarify the traveler’s statement. However, the second also demonstrates something that may not be as clear in the first, and that is the pause after *said*. We made be tempted for the *initial caesura*:

> **Who said ‖ Two vast | and trunk | less legs | of stone** &c.

There is definitely the break before the traveler speaks, but whether it is technically a caesura is questionable since it does not break the metrical foot. The punctuation itself (dash) may be metrically timed, but caesuras are never metrically timed. There is definitely a break in the flow of the verse and marking a rhythmic point of division. Apart from this, there are other aspects to consider. Most would scan this verse, as a pure iambic:

> **Whŏ sāid | Twŏ vāst | ănd trūnk | lĕss lēgs | ŏf stōne**

and although this appears acceptable, it leads to a very uninspiring reading of the verse. Also, it does not fit with the break after *said* whether colon or dash.

The mandatory pause after *said* whether at a colon or dash would mean that the punctuation is metrically timed. This is a necessity regardless.

> **Whŏ sāid | ° Twō | vāst ănd trŭnk | lĕss lēgs | ŏf stōne**

This leaves us with a dactyl in the third foot. There may be a possible promotion on *trunk*, but this is very unlikely in the reading. If the cretic appeared here, it would create a more noticeable pause between the third and fourth feet.[6]

# Verse 3

## *Stand in the desart … Near them, on the sand,*

Some versions of the poem omit the ellipsis and so the verse is scanned as pure iambic:

> **Stănd īn | thĕ dēs | ărt (§) Nēar | thĕm ōn | thĕ sānd**

On a closer, if not even casual reading, we can see this is pure nonsense. Without the medial caesura, the verse becomes strangely ambiguous and somewhat comical when following verse 2. However it is not the caesura that is metrically timed, but the ellipsis. As to whether it represents missing words or something unsaid is open to conjecture, but the lengthier pause is a suitable interpretation.

It is not possible to divide an iambic pentameter line precisely in half. There is no possibility of symmetry, so it would mean that there is a variation in the meter and hence rhythm.

> **Stānd ĭn | thĕ dēsărt | ° ° | Nēar thĕm | ŏn thĕ sānd**

The verse's symmetry is produced by the metrically timed ellipsis. It produces no difference in the scansion but does indicate that there is a lengthy pause created by the ellipsis. This in turn affects the reading of the verse creating a more dramatic effect which is required.

The verse itself does not contain any iambs at all. Yet the emphases created by the trochees are metrically appropriate as are the placement of the amphibrach in the second foot and anapest in the fourth. We see that the verse in not iambic in itself, nor is the rhythm. However, the iambic nature does finally start to pick up with the anapest following into verse 4.

# Verse 4

## *Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,*

This verse will scan properly as iambic pentameter. We do notice the obvious pauses at the commas. However, this punctuation is not metrically timed, yet it controls the speed of reading very well. The punctuation encloses full iambs in each instance which adds to the reading. Initial and terminal caesuras present themselves at the commas. The iambicity of the verse carries from verse 3 after caesura, trochee and anapest.

> **Hălf sūnk ⧙ ă shāt | tĕred vīs | ăge līes ⧙ whŏse frō͞wn**

There is no choice but to lead with the iamb after verse 3 to follow without difficulty. The emphasis on *sunk* is very appropriate and exhibits some of the phanopoeia that we would expect from Shelley. From here we note that the iamb of verse 5 will follow naturally.

What should also be noted from verses 3 and 4 is the use of assonance and sibilance with *'s'*.

# Verse 5

## *And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,*

How awesome is this verse! The comma here does not create as greater pause compared to those in verse 4, nor it is required. The overall scansion results in one of the few iambic pentameter verses in *Ozymandias*, along with verse 4.

The comma after *lip* allows a smooth but slightly paused transition into the next foot:

> **Ănd wrīn | klĕd līp | ănd snē͞er | ŏf cōld | cŏmmānd**

It should be noted that the alignment of speech stress and metrical accent is precise.

# Verse 6

## *Tell that its sculptor well those passions read*

This verse can very well be patterned on the iamb:

> **Tĕll thāt | ĭts scūlp | tŏr wēll | thŏse pās | sı͡ŏns rēad**

but we need to consider how it follows from verse 5. A quick check tells us that the leading foot may well be a trochee since there is little to be gained with any emphasis on *that*:

> **Tēll thăt | ĭts scūlp | tŏr wēll | thŏse pās | sı͡ŏns rēad**

There is definitely no hint of a clipped iamb at the start and there are clearly five metrical accents aligning with the speech stresses irrespective of the choice

of starting foot. However, the trochaic start is far more impressive.

You may consider this line as *iambic pentameter* since the use of the starting trochee is quite common.

# Verse 7

## *Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,*

This verse too can be forced to adhere to iambic pentameter:

> **Whĭch yēt | sŭrvīve | stămped ōn | thĕse līfe | lĕss thīngs**

However, the reading is far from satisfactory. It is the third foot which comes into question. We would expect a greater speech stress on *stamped*. If left as an iamb, the verse borders on the ridiculous, thus we are looking for at least the trochee.

> **Whĭch yēt | sŭrvīve | stāmped ŏn | thĕse līfe | lĕss thīngs**

Now the question is: Are there five speech stresses in this verse? It seems not to be the case.

> **Whĭch yēt | sŭrvīve | stāmped ŏn thĕse | lĭfelĕss thīngs**

One may expect *lifeless* to have some speech stress in the first syllable and indeed there may be a slight more emphasis than the surrounding syllables, but barely enough difference to be noticed unless purposely stressed. It would be very unlikely to find the cretic ending a verse.

The reason the commas is not metrically timed is that the introduction of the dactyl after the iamb creates the required pause. Both dactyl and anapest allow and encourage the quicker reading of the verse.

# Verse 8

## *The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:*

The commas ending verse 7 creates a dramatic pause leading into verse 8. Once again, attempting to force this verse into strict iambic pentameter would be foolish. It renders correctly as follows:

> **Thĕ hānd | thăt mōcked thĕm | ănd thĕ hēart | thăt fēd**

It is with this verse too that we only hear four speech stresses. We have what I would call a beautiful and effective construction with the amphibrach and anapest enclosed by iambs. There is no disruption to the overall iambic rhythm, but necessity has it that the verse cannot be purely iambic in its construction.

# The Sestet

## Verse 9

### *And on the pedestal, these words appear:*

Here too another verse that could be scanned as strict iambic pentameter:

> **Ănd ōn | thĕ pēd | ĕstāl | thĕse wōrds | ăppēar**

Doing such, we find that imposed promotions give an unnatural speech stress on the last syllable of *pedestal* and that of *words* with a somewhat demotion on *these*. We may say that the promotion in *pedestal* is not great, but the break-up of *the pedestal* certainly does not suit the iambic rhythm. As for *these words*, the argument for an iamb is valid, but the use of a trochee in the reading has more effect.

Essentially there are only four major stress that are apparent speech-wise with the comma marking the caesura.

> **Ănd ōn | thĕ pēdĕstăl ‖ thēse wŏrds | ăppēar**

The leadup to after the initial iamb is quicken and it is the *secundus paeon* which allows this to happen. Added to this with the following trochee, they allow the rhythm to be broken at the caesura and picked up after it.

## Verse 10

### *‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:*

Now this particular verse has always been singled out for not adhering to *iambic pentameter*, but as we have seen there are a number of verses that are

not strict *iambic pentameter* and are using valid metrical substitutions. The discussion has always centered on how the name *Ozymandias* is pronounced, with many and varied attempts to confine it to four syllables. This is from the group who insist that every verse is perfect iambic pentameter, of which they are not. The fact is that the name is five syllables, the verse is not feminine and the reality is that it makes no difference on the syllable count. Any butchering of the name will not change the verse as it stands.

> **Mȳ nāme | ĭs Ōzȳ | māndĭăs ⸗ ° kīng | ŏf kīngs**

The trochee beginning gives more ownership of the name as the last two feet would indicate. We would say that the caesura occurs after *Ozymandias*, but it is the comma that is metrically timed and bringing the pause before *king*. The amphibrach and dactyl in the second and third foot allow the correct enunciation of *Ozymandias* and highlight the pause produced by the metrically timed comma.

So the mystery has been solved! And this verse is far from being iambic pentameter in its construction.

# Verse 11

## *Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'*

It is apparent that we have both medial and terminal caesuras, but this does little for the scansion of this verse since they are never metrically timed.

> **Lo͞ok ŏn | mў wo͞rks ⸗ yĕ Mīght | ў ⸗ ānd | dĕspāir**

This verse could well begin with an iamb or trochee. However, the inclination is toward the trochee with both metrical accent and speech stress on *Look* to draw attention to what the reader needs to see, almost exclamatory. Yet there still appears to be a problem with scanning this as iambic pentameter.

The caesuras only indicate a break, more so in what is being said or the way. They are not a form of punctuation, and they do not actually do anything for the verse scansion-wise. But we need to look at the flow of speech in this verse as their placements may require a change in the reading.

Both commas indicate the caesura, but the second comma is metrically timed. It needs to be due to the placement of the amphibrach.

> **Lo͞ok ŏn | mў wo͞rks ⸗ yĕ Mīghtў ⸗ ° ānd | dĕspāir**

This in itself encourages the pause after *Mighty*. It is pointless to separate the syllables of *Mighty* across two feet as this would create an absurd reading of the verse.

# Verse 12

## *Nothing beside remains. Round the decay*

The period signals the medial caesura in this verse. This time it is the period which is metrically timed to give the appropriate pause after *remains*.

> **Nōthĭng | bĕsīde | rĕmā͡ins ‖ ° Rōund | thĕ dĕcāy**

The verse ends in an anapest giving a more sensible reading and construction and also with the speed of reading which iambs would not allow. The change of rhythm means that the line cannot be entirely iambic, but it is very effective.

# Verse 13

## *Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare*

There is a similar construction to verse 12 albeit a comma being metrically timed and finishing with the anapest:

> **Ŏf thāt | cŏlōs | săl wrēck | ° bōund | lĕss ănd bāre**

We note that it is often the speed of natural reading which determines the metrical feet, not the other way round.

# Verse 14

## *The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

We could scan this line as pure iambic pentameter:

> **Thĕ lōne | ănd lēv |ĕl sānds | strĕtch fār | ăwāy**

But we do notice an obvious pause after *sands*. Whether dramatic effect or not, the verse does not continue as we would expect.

> **Thĕ lōne ănd | lēvĕl sānds | strĕtch fār | ăwāy**

This verse has the amphibrach and cretic at the very beginning, a wonderful combination. Although not common, the cretic does exist in English poetry, and here it makes its presence known. It is the cretic that allows the pause, no matter the length, after *sands*. It also gives a more comfortable reading into *level sands*.

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# Concluding Comments

## Is *Ozymandias* a Sonnet?

*Ozymandias* is one of the most brilliant pieces of poetry you will read. It is generally classed as a sonnet, but has been shown, it fails on a number of points, specifically in the construction of many of the verses.

In this period of writing, a sonnet was expected to have certain characteristics. One being that it was written in *iambic pentameter*. For any piece to be classified as *iambic pentameter*, the majority of verses must be constructed as *iambic pentameter*. This simply not the case with *Ozymandias*.

As to whether *Ozymandias* is classified as a *sonnet* is debatable. At times it is referred to correctly as a *quatorzain*, and this classification takes nothing away from the poem. There are also those who may classify this as a *nonce sonnet* meaning that the poet has made up the rime scheme, or that it is not a standard and recognized rime scheme. However, Shelley did use this rime scheme a number of times. It is an unusual rime scheme namely: *a b a b a c d c | e d e f e f*. There is no clear indication that he necessarily wrote it as a *sonnet*. He may have started to do so, but gave way to his natural writing style.

Now it cannot be an *Italian* sonnet. The *Italian* sonnet cannot have a direct link in the rime scheme between the octave and sestet, nor can it have more than five rimes. We find that there is a definite octave/sestet demarcation, so here there is a similarity to the traditional sonnet. Shelley has both a direct link between octave and sestet (with the d-rime) along with six rimes.

It is one thing to scan and force the verses to *iambic pentameter*, it is another to actually read the verses in this form. Although is may be possible to do so, we find that most of the verses do not sit well. Metrical accent, speech stress and natural reading speed do not align. As a result, the forcefulness and power of the poem is lost.

Now the biggest argument for the *iambic pentameter* is that the poem *sounds* like it, it appears to have that general iambic rhythm, and I do not dispute this. But sound and metrical construction can be worlds apart. The reason *Ozymandias* sounds like it is written in *iambic pentameter* is that other metrical feet have been substituted for the iamb. In the course of this analysis, we find the *dactyl*, *amphibrach* and *anapest* make quite a show of themselves, but these are all valid metrical substitutions for the iamb.

The difficulty that lies with *Ozymandias* is that these so-called substitutions occur far too often. In fact eleven of the fourteen verses have metrical substitutions. We are left with three possible lines being *iambic pentameter*, but not enough to classify the entire poem as *iambic pentameter*.

Thus my conclusion is that Shelley's *Ozymandias* no matter how brilliant, powerful and moving it is, is neither written in *iambic pentameter* nor is it correctly classified as a sonnet.

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1. **desart** = an accepted spelling of **desert** at the time of writing ↩
2. **these words appear** replaced **this legend clear** ↩
3. verse 10 ↩
4. **Verses 1 and 10** have eleven syllables with the remaining twelve verses each of ten, hence the tendency to force Shelley's work into strict iambic form. ↩
5. **Metrical feet** by themselves, do not always create *sense units*, and words will often be split over two feet. In some instances, possibly more. ↩
6. cf. verse 14 ↩