A writer for all time

‘He was not of an age, but for all time!’ stated the preface of William Shakespeare’s collected plays when they were first published in 1623.

At that point, seven years after the playwright’s death, Shakespeare was just one of many respected writers of his era, but in the years that followed, the words of that preface proved to be prophetic. His reputation grew and grew and today Shakespeare is widely recognized as the greatest writer in the history of English literature. His plays live on, translated into at least eighty languages and performed all over the globe. Why is it that, four hundred years after his death, his work is still rated so highly?
Timeless stories

B

(1) Many writers before Shakespeare could write great comedy, or tragedy, or history, but Shakespeare could tell great stories in all these genres and more: from quirky fairy tale (A Midsummer Night’s Dream) to political thriller (Richard III). He rarely came up with original plots for his plays – in fact, he usually took them from traditional stories, history or other writers. In his hands, however, they became powerful tales that transcend time and culture. Romeo and Juliet is a story of love, hate and teenage rebellion against authoritarian parents. Macbeth shows the dangers of ruthless ambition. Othello deals with insecurity, trust and jealousy. It’s no surprise that theatre and film directors return again and again to his plays for their material. As well as productions using the original language and settings, there have been imaginative reinterpretations as musicals (Romeo and Juliet / West Side Story), sci-fi films (The Tempest / Forbidden Planet), high school romantic comedies (Twelfth Night / She’s the Man) Bollywood films (Macbeth / Maqbool), and even children’s cartoons (Hamlet / The Lion King).
Complex characters

Shakespeare portrayed the richness and variety of human life in a way that has never been equalled in English literature and many actors believe that his characters are drama’s most challenging and satisfying roles. Each of his protagonists has a complicated mixture of qualities and faults which feel very real to the audience. (2) We can easily picture ourselves as Hamlet, a person of gentle character who is led by extreme circumstances to plan violent revenge on his uncle, or as King Lear, flattered into trusting the wrong people and driving away the ones who truly love him. Every character, however bad, has a human side. (3) Shakespeare even managed to make a sympathetic character out of Shylock, the shockingly cruel Jewish villain in The Merchant of Venice, by describing his experience of anti-Jewish abuse.

Beautiful poetry

While some parts of Shakespeare’s plays are in prose, his greatest speeches are in verse and their language, though old-fashioned, still resonates powerfully with modern audiences. His rude jokes ensure that the theatre is often filled with laughter, but moments later there might be an achingly beautiful passage about love or chilling words about death, revenge or jealousy. As well as at least thirty-seven plays, he is known for 154 short poems called sonnets. It is thought that he started writing these in 1592 when (4) the plague stopped Londoners from being able to go to the theatre. They include some of the most famous lines about love and beauty in the English language.
Innovative language

E

Shakespeare enjoyed playing with words and his language is full of interesting images and metaphors. People still use many of them today, unaware that they were invented by him: green-eyed monster (meaning ‘jealousy’) and wear your heart on your sleeve (meaning ‘show your emotions’) are two examples. Even individual words were a chance for Shakespeare to show off his creativity. Of the 17,000 different words that he used in his plays and poems, he made up an incredible 1,700 of them, and we are still using 800 today. They include everyday words, such as generous, apostrophe, hurry, road and amazement.

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(5) Perhaps one day a writer will be able to match the achievements of William Shakespeare, but until then he stands at the pinnacle of English literature, setting the standard to which all other great writers aspire.