

**T**he most famous writer in English in the world, William Shakespeare has a unique position in global literature. The worldwide<sup>1</sup> reputation of the Bard<sup>2</sup> of Avon came from a number of plays<sup>3</sup> written more than four centuries ago and performed<sup>4</sup> in a small London theatre. And yet<sup>5</sup> his contemporary, the playwright<sup>6</sup> Ben Jonson, made one of the most accurate<sup>7</sup> predictions of all time when he said that Shakespeare "was not of an age<sup>8</sup> but for all time".

### A WITTY REBEL

We have very little information about this master of English, with just a few official documents and not even a single<sup>9</sup> manuscript written in his hand. He never even<sup>10</sup> spelt<sup>11</sup> his own name as William Shakespeare. He left<sup>12</sup> no diaries and no direct descendants, as he had no great-grandchildren<sup>13</sup>.

### MARRIED AT EIGHTEEN

Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564. He married at eighteen. His wife, Anne Hathaway, aged twenty-six, was already pregnant<sup>14</sup>. The couple<sup>15</sup> had three children. And then our information dries up<sup>16</sup> for eight years. These are Shakespeare's so-called<sup>17</sup> 'Lost Years'. We then find the writer in London, where he spends<sup>18</sup> the next twenty years devoting his life to his art, writing more than one million words of poetic drama of the highest quality.

### PLAYS, POEMS AND SONNETS

Shakespeare wrote a total of thirty-nine plays, 154 sonnets and three narrative poems. Critics have divided the plays into tragedies, comedies and tragicomedies (orromances). The titles are famous all over the world and include *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer's Night Dream* and *The Merchant*<sup>19</sup> *of Venice*. He was "a writer of great intellectual rapidity, perceptiveness<sup>20</sup> and poetic power."

**“ To be, or not to be: that is the question: Whether it is nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them? To die: to sleep; no more; and by a sleep to say we end the heartache ”**

### ENDLESSLY QUOTED

Shakespeare's works are the second most-quoted<sup>21</sup> after the Bible. He is the author of 10 per cent of the most-quoted lines<sup>22</sup> in English. His line "To be or not to be" is the most famous phrase in world literature. The most influential writer in the English language, he introduced more than 1,700 original words — such as<sup>23</sup> 'lonely', 'frugal' and 'dwindle'<sup>24</sup> — into English. Eighty of his phrases, such as 'breaking the ice' and 'heart of gold', are still in current use<sup>25</sup>. His work has influenced not just the world's literature but also art, music and even psychiatry.

### POETIC PERSONALITY

At the age of forty-nine, Shakespeare retired to Stratford-upon-Avon. He died just three years later. He is England's national playwright but we know almost nothing of his character. Ben Jonson, the greatest of his contemporaries, called him "Sweet Swan<sup>26</sup> of Avon" and said that his personality was in his poetry, that "the style was the man." Jonson knew that he was in the presence of genius: Shakespeare was the "Soul<sup>27</sup> of the age, the applause, delight<sup>28</sup>, the wonder<sup>29</sup> of our stage". Wonderful words for the greatest writer in the English language. ☺

## EXERCISES IN Work It Out!



SCAN, READ  
& LISTEN

02

LOWER INTERMEDIATE **B1**

### GLOSSARY

- 1 **worldwide:** mondiale
- 2 **bard:** bardo (arcaico), poeta
- 3 **plays:** opere teatrali
- 4 **to perform:** recitare, rappresentare
- 5 **and yet:** comunque
- 6 **playwright:** drammaturgo
- 7 **accurate:** precise
- 8 **age:** epoca
- 9 **not even a single:** neanche uno
- 10 **never even:** mai neanche
- 11 **to spell:** scrivere
- 12 **to leave:** lasciare
- 13 **great-grandchildren:** pronipoti
- 14 **pregnant:** incinta
- 15 **couple:** coppia
- 16 **to dry up:** esaurire
- 17 **so-called:** cosiddetti
- 18 **to spend:** dedicare
- 19 **merchant:** mercante
- 20 **perceptiveness:** perspicacia, sagacità
- 21 **most-quoted:** più citato
- 22 **lines:** frasi
- 23 **such as:** come per esempio
- 24 **to dwindle:** diminuire, affievolirsi
- 25 **in current use:** di uso comune oggi
- 26 **swan:** cigno
- 27 **soul:** anima
- 28 **delight:** piacere
- 29 **wonder:** meraviglia