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Do Thy Best Backstory

Of all the household names in our world, William Shakespeare surely leads the pack. His works are so enduring that, although he died four centuries ago, every high school student studies his writing, and entire theater companies are dedicated to producing his plays. But he wasn't always a superstar of English literature.

Shakespeare was born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon, in England. He came from a moderately well off family, and his father was a public official, but little is known of his formative years. At age 18, he married Anne Hathaway, with whom he had three children: a daughter, Susanna, and twins Hamnet and Judith.

Shakespeare left his family in Stratford and lived in London, where he became a success in the theatrical scene as an actor and writer. He was part owner of a playing company called the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which changed its name to the King's Men after the crowning of King James I in 1603.

During this period, not only did Shakespeare manage to build a successful career that supported his family and garnered accolades for his plays and poems. He also developed the writing style that made him a literary star who still shines, long after his lifetime. He adhered to the conventional writing styles of the day, but Shakespeare also developed a unique voice and form, blending creativity and innovation with styles that the public would accept readily.

The topics that interested him evolved throughout his life. In his early years, he wrote Romeo and Juliet and some of his best-known comedies, such as A Midsummer Night's Dream, Much Ado About Nothing and As You Like It. Perhaps with political intentions—some critics speculate that he was writing to justify the Tudor Dynasty—he also wrote several histories, such as Henry V. As he aged, he wrote his famous tragedies: Hamlet, King Lear, Othello and Macbeth. In his final period, he wrote tragicomedies, such as Cymbeline and The Tempest, which are tragic, but end in forgiveness and reconciliation.

At age 49, he retired to Stratford. By the time of his death at age 52, Shakespeare had written at least 38 plays and 154 sonnets. His relentless creativity also gave him a place in our everyday language. In Shakespeare's works, he coined or popularized at least 135 expressions that we still use today, from "star-crossed lovers" to "method to my madness" to "a dish fit for the gods."

Through his words, Shakespeare lives on, 400 years later—beloved by generations in print, on stage, and on the screen as the most-performed author of all time.

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