



Love Is All You Need

A new book argues that Goethe was a startlingly modern thinker about what makes a family.

On the face of it, Johann Goethe—the German novelist, poet, and playwright who lived from the second half of the 18th century through the first 32 years of the 19th—was a man of his times, a leading figure in European classicism and romanticism.

And yet he also speaks with striking immediacy to contemporary questions about what constitutes a family, says Susan Gustafson, the Karl F. and Bertha A. Fuchs Professor of German Studies and author of a new

book, *Goethe's Families of the Heart* (Bloomsbury Academia, 2016).

Goethe's texts are filled with fractured relationships—parents who try to force their children into advantageous marriages, children who must choose between their own desires and familial acceptance, and lives twisted by shame and secrecy.

But while scholarship has focused on Goethe's broken families, Gustafson's attention was caught by something else: the

alternative families that his characters construct for themselves.

"The main thing he's claiming is that the fundamental essence of family is love," she says.

In the 1796 coming-of-age novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, or *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Goethe's protagonist tries to exchange his future as a businessman for a life in the theater. He wanders the countryside, sometimes connecting with women, and sometimes with men, in a series of fluid,

nonexclusive relationships. And he encounters many children, one of whom, named Felix, he suspects may be his biological son.

He "immediately connects to the children through his feelings of love, adopting them into his family," Gustafson says.

The stories embedded within the novel are about people learning what family is and how to build relationships with others. "He describes it in terms of love—he's in love with these people,"



FAMILY AFFAIR: Gustafson chose a family portrait by American colonial artist Charles Wilson Peale (above) for the cover of her book because it was contemporaneous with Goethe; depicts a child at the center of a family, as occurs in Goethe's works; and shows combinations of adult males and females bonding in a family context.

she says. "At one point, he's with another man, and he has three children. Felix is one, and two others he has brought in as he's traveling. And he says, 'Das ist meine wunderbare Familie'—'This is my wonderful family.'"

In the 1821 sequel, *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, or *Wilhelm Meister's Travels*, the character

concludes that his purpose in life is to understand what holds people apart and remove those obstacles.

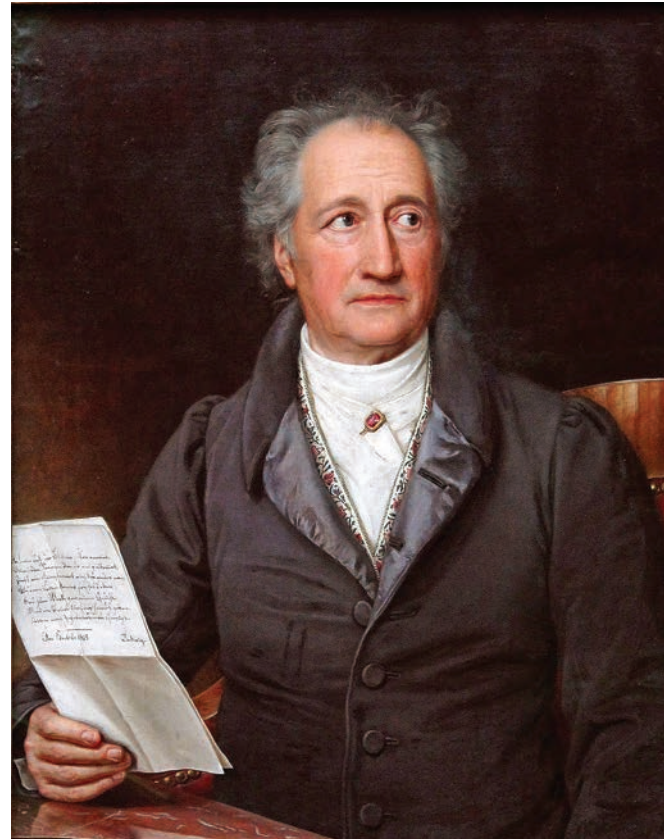
Goethe's project, Gustafson suggests, was similar. She cites French theorist Michel Foucault's argument that medical, legal, religious, and other forms of social discourse together created a definition of homosexuality. But as dominant discourses emerge, defining reality in certain ways, so, too, do alternatives. "It's going to open the door for someone to say, 'Wait a minute—there's another way to think about this.' And that's what I'm claiming Goethe is actually doing," she says.

A man of science as well as letters, Goethe brought to bear on his writing one of the main scientific interests of his day, the interaction of chemicals. His 1809 novel, *Die Wahlverwandtschaften*, or *Elective Affinities*—the term at the time for chemicals' tendencies to combine with some substances but not others—explores the idea in reference to human relationships.

He's considering questions that are in the foreground today, Gustafson says: "He brings up issues such as, can two men or two women be couples and bring up children? Are biological families always good? Can adoptive families be as good as biological families?" And he's showing that the configurations of families aren't what matters, she says. "What matters is the love."

In *Elective Affinities*, two couples rearrange themselves so that, in the end, the two women are together, as are the two men. Scholars have tried to create a taxonomy of friendship and love in his work. "But Goethe doesn't say anything like that," says Gustafson. He describes how the couples move into different configurations. "But he doesn't say one arrangement is better than the other, more likely than the other. He just says, this happens."

Goethe's writings found opposition in their day. His play *Stella: A Play for Lovers* (1776) originally ended with a man and



FAMILY TIES: Johann Goethe (above) was intrigued by different family configurations and suggested throughout his works that "the fundamental essence of family is love," says Susan Gustafson, author of *Goethe's Families of the Heart*.

two women in a *ménage à trois*. Audiences were outraged, and the play was removed from the stage. In 1806, Goethe rewrote it as *Stella: A Tragedy*. In that version, the man shoots himself and one of the women poisons herself.

"And that was OK," says Gustafson. "That one, he could show."

But as he revised the ending, Goethe also reworked the rest of the play, strengthening the women's expressions of love for each other. Scholars have been thrown off the scent of his project, Gustafson says, by a 1983 translation into English of what ostensibly was the 1806 text—but actually was the 1776 text with the 1806 ending tacked on.

"Goethe made 190 changes [to the 1776 text when he republished it 30 years later], but the only change they put in there was the ending, and so scholars have focused on that," she says.

Gustafson now has a translation of both texts under contract for publication.

Critics have read Goethe with an eye to relationships between men. In fact, Gustafson's own previous book—*Men Desiring Men: The Poetry of Same-Sex Identity and Desire in German Classicism* (Wayne State University Press, 2002)—was in that vein. She says her new book extends that analysis, drawing in issues of women and families.

Gustafson's reading of the author is influenced by her own life. She adopted two children and says her experiences heightened her awareness of representations of adoption in his writing.

"Throughout his literary work, Goethe brings up issues that people still struggle with," she says. "And he's basically saying all kinds of families are equal."

—Kathleen McGarvey,
with Bob Marcotte