William Shakespeare is immensely popular and at the same time is widely recognized as one of the greatest writers of both English and world literature. Every year millions view his plays both on stage and on film, and millions more willingly or unwillingly study his writings in the classroom. He is often quoted—sometimes out of context—as a source of wisdom on topics of all sorts. Those of us concerned about marriage and families might reasonably wonder what he has to say about these topics.

Family is certainly important in many of Shakespeare’s plays. The comedies usually involve family discord of some sort and almost always end with marriage. Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet would hold little interest apart from the wide range of family relationships in the plays. Like Shakespeare’s other tragedies, King Lear shows us families torn apart by conflict and betrayal. The Winter’s Tale is one of a number of plays in which families are subjected to terrible stresses but are ultimately healed and reunited.
The title of my essay comes from Shakespeare's *King Lear* and refers to the “holy cords” of human relationship, especially in families. The odd word in the title, *intrinse* (meaning “intricate, entangled, involved”), points to a peculiar quality Shakespeare wants us to notice about such relationships: they are so intricately bound together that pulling them apart seems to require not merely an untangling of connections, but an act of violence. The phrase from *Lear* should be meaningful to anyone who thinks family relationships are an essential feature of human life, especially for those who consider these relationships holy. For me, the phrase connects my academic interest in Shakespeare and Renaissance family life with my own experience with family.

What this essay will reveal, among other things, is that scholarship and literature are rarely objective or impersonal enterprises. I have studied Renaissance family life for twenty years or more because I want to understand Shakespeare better, but even more because I want to understand family better and experience its potential for joy and growth. I value family because I want to learn how to love. Marriage and family, which have been called a “school of love,” offer great challenges and opportunities for anyone engaged in that learning process. More than anything, I want my relationships with my wife and children and other family members to have the power and permanence implied in the phrase “too intrinse to unloose,” to be strong and positive and deeply grounded. In short, my academic work, my reading of Shakespeare, and my own family life both in reality and in aspiration all connect and shed light on, and sometimes raise questions about, each other.

During the past thirty years or so, academic study of Shakespeare and the Renaissance has been dominated by a negative view of marriage and family and of gender relations in general. The hold of this negative view has recently loosened somewhat and become more balanced. But the negative view continues to have much power. According to this view, marriage and family in Shakespeare’s time were essentially oppressive and unhappy, with anxious males seeking to control and with wives and children being either fearful or rebellious or self-destructively submissive.

Some versions of the negative view have taken a more subtle approach, acknowledging the happiness of the happy endings in Shakespearean plays and the expressions of love and tenderness, at least in literary pictures of marriage and family. But these versions interpret the apparent positives negatively, usually in one of two ways. One argument is that the happiness and love associated with family life were only fantasies, not the way life was really experienced. The other argument paradoxically views these positive ideals as negative in an even deeper way. Love, harmony, and happiness may indeed have been part of the real experiences of Shakespeare's contemporaries, yet these highly valued and movingly portrayed experiences are really destructive, because they depend on submitting to relationships, roles, and social structures. More precisely, they are bought at the “price” of being a dutiful child or a faithful wife.

In *As You Like It*, for example, Rosalind, who has orchestrated most of the action of the play, ends by saying to her father and then to her future husband Orlando, “To you I give myself, for I am yours” (5.4.116–17). She submits to these relationships willingly and has even arranged the scene of reunion and revelation. She has spent much of the play learning and especially teaching Orlando about the realities of marriage—in particular, teaching him that it is a union of two real, imperfect people, not the idealistic fantasy Orlando has been imagining—and yet affirming that marriage can be a loving and happy union.

But according to the dominant view in recent Shakespearean criticism, Rosalind is the unwitting dupe of social expectations and roles and is losing—or at least risks losing—an independent, self-created identity as she submits to her father and to her future husband. Thus, in this view, even in the happy, loving endings of Shakespearean drama, it is adult males who maintain control, exercise power, dominate, and have their own needs served.

*King Lear* has recently been interpreted in much the same way, although of course the tragic outcome makes the point even more starkly. Several recent writers—Janet Adelman, Peter Erickson, Kathleen McLuskie,
SHAKESPEARE’S PLAYS MAKE IT CLEAR THAT NOT ALL MARRIAGES WERE HAPPY, YET AT THE SAME TIME THEY CONVEY A VISION OF POTENTIAL LOVING MUTUALITY AND HAPPINESS.

and others—argue that the traditional, positive view of Cordelia as a dutiful, loving daughter who forgives her father is dangerous because it makes her a victim. Cordelia’s actions encourage young women generally to serve the needs of others, especially adult males, and thereby lose their identities and even, like Cordelia, their lives, rather than protecting and promoting their own pursuits and desires.

How do I respond to such interpretations? I have wanted to believe that there is more to the positive moments in Shakespeare than such critics have found, yet I have also wanted to know what family life was really like for Lawrence Stone, especially his groundbreaking volume *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800.* Stone argues that family relations were marked by distance and often hostility, with complete control and sometimes brutal treatment on the part of fathers, and deference, fear, and the expectation of obedience on the part of women and children. All of this supposedly took place with wide social acceptance and approval, so that an English father of this period was, as Lawrence Stone puts it, “a legalized petty tyrant within the home” who “lorded it over his wife and children with the quasi-absolute authority of a despot.”

My own effort to understand family life in Renaissance England has convinced me that Stone’s negative view of the Renaissance family is mistaken. Other historians, who present a much different picture of family life in the period, have challenged Stone’s view. Ralph Houlbrooke, David Cressy, Susan Amussen, Keith Wrightson, Alan Macfarlane, Linda Pollock, and many others demonstrate that family life did not change as radically or quickly as Stone maintains. They conclude that women often took a forceful and independent role in family life; that even during the Renaissance period, authority was much less arbitrarily and destructively employed than Stone suggests; and that intimacy and harmony within the family were not only ideals, but often realities.

In his assessment of Stone’s book, Houlbrooke argues that “Much evidence of love, affection and the bitterness of loss dating from the first half of Stone’s period”—that is, the period most relevant to Shakespeare—“has simply been ignored.” Houlbrooke notes that, despite its admirable breadth and energy, Stone’s book is marred by its questionable assumptions about the connection between “ideals and practice” and by its “perpetuation of sociological myths.” Macfarlane demonstrates at length how the book “ignores or dismisses contrary evidence, misinterprets ambiguous evidence, fails to use relevant evidence, imports evidence from other countries to fill gaps, and jumbles up the chronology.”

Many historians understandably consider this Stone’s “most dan-
gerous and controversial” book. Some go so far as to call it “unconvincing,” “a compendium of distortions,” even a “disaster.” One of the most damaging results of Stone’s influence has been the assumption by many who depend on his work that all the horrific conflicts and abuses in the plays’ families are a revelation of what life was like in Shakespeare’s time, not—what makes more dramatic sense—violations of the desired and expected norm for family life.

The evidence, viewed fairly and carefully, creates a complex and mixed picture of family life in the period, with negative elements but also many positive ones. In particular, fathers were not commonly the stereotypical villains that Stone’s work makes them out to be. In fact, although Shakespeare’s contemporaries viewed fathers with some ambivalence, they saw them mainly as nurturing figures. Attitudes in early modern England generally acknowledged the importance of paternal authority and filial duty, but valued other elements of the parent-child relationship at least as much. One of the most striking features of the Renaissance image of fathers—largely ignored or misrepresented in contemporary criticism—is its association with kindness, nurturing, and generous self-giving.

In an astute and persuasive essay analyzing cultural attitudes in the period, Debora Shuger has shown that fathers were usually thought of in contrast to kings or despots, rather than as repeating the king/despot role in the family. “Instead of conflating patriarchy with royal authoritarianism,” the common view generally assumed “that a father’s relation to his child [was] essentially different from political relations of submission, domination, and the struggle to acquire power.” The word father, rather than connoting “authority, discipline, rationality, law, and so on,” more commonly was associated with “forgiveness, nurturing, and tenderness.” Even the court chaplain to Elizabeth I and James I, Lancelot Andrewes, “consistently and explicitly opposes the two figures” of king and father, “associating the king with power and subordination, the father with unconditional love and inclusion.” My own reading of large quantities of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century material strongly confirms Shuger’s contention. Sources from the period indicate that the word fatherly was almost always synonymous with kindly or benevolent. One finds such phrases as “a most tender and loving nourcing [nursing] Father,” “a gentle and tender father,” “Were not his affections most fatherly,” “fatherly kindness,” “fatherly love,” “fatherly care,” “fatherly gentleness,” “fatherly and kindly power,” “benevolent and Fatherlie dealings.” Obviously, the ideal and expectation was—in the words of John Newnham—that “the naturall and the kindelie love of Parentes towards their children, is, or ought to bee, as constant and readie” as God’s unfailing love.

We understandably wonder how well this ideal was put into practice. Shuger points to various indications—and I could add many more—suggesting that more often than not the ideal corresponded to actual fatherly behavior. Shuger paraphrases Steven Ozment’s judgment that “sixteenth-century parents appear to have been affectionate, often (to the dismay of the moralists) indulgent, and deeply emotionally involved with their children” and quotes Lancelot Andrewes’
claim that “Fathers stand thus affected towards their children, that they are hardly brought to chasten them; and if there be no remedy, yet they are ready to forgive, or soon cease punishing.”

Shuger concludes that it does not “seem plausible that humanists and preachers would appeal so confidently to parental tenderness if such emotions were culturally unavailable.”

Much the same can be said of the relations between husbands and wives. Shakespeare’s plays make it clear that not all marriages were happy, yet at the same time they convey a vision of potentially loving mutuality and happiness that many of Shakespeare’s contemporaries would have shared. A passage near the end of Henry V nicely captures both sides of marriage. The Queen of France, although recognizing the challenges of marriage, hopes that France and England may be as happily united as a married couple ought to be: “As man and wife, being two, are one in love, / So be there ‘twixt your kingdoms such a spousal, / That never may ill office, or fell jealousy, / Which troubles oft the bed of blessed marriage, / Thrust in between the paction of these kingdoms” (5.2.361–65). Sources from Shakespeare’s time echo the view expressed here and in particular emphasize the ideal of intimate love and union in marriage. According to Thomas Gataker, husband and wife “are neerer than Friends, and Brethren; or than Parents and Children. . . . Man and Wife are . . . the one ingraffed into the other, and so fastned together, that they cannot againe be sundred.”

A wife, writes William Perkins, is “the associate” of her husband, “not only in office and authority, but also in advice and counsel unto him.” Among the hundreds of other examples that could be cited are passages from the popular preacher Henry Smith (“unlesse there be a joyning of hearts and knitting of affections together, it is not Marriage indeed, but in shew and name”); John Wing (conjugal love “must be the most deare, intimate, precious and entire, that hart can have toward a creature; none but the love of GOD above, is above it. . . . The Fountaine of love, will have the current run stronger to the Wife, then to any, or to all other”); and Rachel Speght (“neither the wife may say to her husband, nor the husband unto his wife, I have no need of thee, no more then the members of the body may so say each to other, betweene whom there is such a sympathie, that if one member suffer, all suffer with it”; “Marriage is a merriage, and this worlds Paradise, where there is mutuall love”).

Such happiness and love require the offer of self in service, patience, and forgiveness, but (contrary to what some modern critics assume) this offer of self is required of the husband as well as the wife. Richard Hooker, a contemporary of Shakespeare’s, notes that “parties married have not anie longer intire power over them selves but ech hath interest in others person.” According to William Perkins, husband and wife “are freely to communicate their goods, their counsel, their labours each to other for the good of themselves and theirs.”

Acknowledging that some husbands fail to live the ideal, Henry Smith advises that both husband and wife must offer themselves to the other: “[L]et all things be commonn betweene them, which were private before
... for they two are one. He may not say as husbands are wont to say, that which is thine is mine, and that which mine is mine owne, but that which is mine is thine, & my selfe to."22 The husbands and husbands-to-be in Shakespeare's plays regularly make this sort of offer—for example, Berowne in Love's Labour's Lost ("O, I am yours, and all that I possess!") [5.2.383]), Claudio in Much Ado ("Lady, as you are mine, I am yours. I give away myself for you, and dote upon the exchange" [2.1.308–09]), and the Duke in Measure for Measure ("if you'll a willing ear incline, / What's mine is yours, and what is yours is mine" [5.1536–37]). Although, given the characters' weaknesses, the offers are at times problematic, they are nevertheless heartfelt. The plays' truly loving husbands and husbands-to-be are shown as sincerely seeking the good of their beloveds, even to the extent of offering their lives if that is required (e.g., Posthumus in Cymbeline: "For Imogen's dear life take mine" [5.4.22]).

The ideals of self-giving, service, and love were not, then, associated exclusively with women and children, but served as expectations for fathers and husbands as well. Once this point is granted, much in Shakespeare's plays makes more sense. King Lear, for instance, does not exemplify standard Renaissance parenting. Instead, he is at fault in his egotism at the beginning of the play, including his attempts to manipulate his daughters and use them to satisfy his own needs. The play shows how Lear changes, in particular how he learns compassion, humility, and submissiveness.

In what is often called "the reconciliation scene" (act 4, scene 7), Lear's daughter Cordelia kneels to ask for his blessing, but at the same time he kneels to ask her forgiveness and says, "I am a very foolish fond old man" (4.7.59). He knows he has treated his daughter badly and that even now he is far from perfect: "You must bear with me," he says. "Pray you now forget, and forgive; I am old and foolish" (4.7.82–83). Lear is only one of a good number of misbehaving Shakespearean fathers and husbands who humble themselves and ask forgiveness.

Of course the critics who take a view different from mine read the same lines and have access, when they choose, to much of the same historical information. The differences in our ways of reading Shakespeare ultimately come down to different visions of life and different views of what makes for human fulfillment. Most of the negative readings of Shakespeare and of family life in his time have assumed that autonomy is more valuable than the kinds of relationships that require the sacrifice of autonomy. They have usually put a higher value on self-fulfillment than on service. My own experience and beliefs lead me to a different view: that seeking our own lives—our own interests and desires in opposition to those of others—is self-destructive; that finding our lives requires that we, in a sense, lose them. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas says much the same thing: "I am defined as a subjectivity, as a singular person, as an `I,' precisely because I am exposed to the other. It is my inescapable and incontrovertible answerability to the other that makes me an individual `I.' So that I become a responsible or ethical `I' to the extent that I agree to depose or
dethrone myself—to abdicate my position of centrality—in favor of the vulnerable other. As the Bible says: ‘He who loses his soul gains it.’”

This same truth is present in Shakespeare’s plays, and it applies to the men as well as to the women. In The Merchant of Venice, Bassanio is confronted with this truth—that he must lose his life in order to find it—when he reads on the casket by which he will win a wife, “He who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath” (2.9.21). This notion—the expansion of identity that comes by risking or offering the self—runs through Shakespearean drama from beginning to end, from The Comedy of Errors, in which Antipholus of Syracuse must “lose” himself “to find a mother and a brother” (1.2.39–40), to The Tempest, where...

...in one voyage
Did Claribel her husband find at Tunis
And Ferdinand, her brother, found a wife
Where he himself was lost;
Prospero, his dukedom
In a poor isle; and all of us, ourselves,
When no man was his own. (5.1.208–13)

Shakespeare is one of the most sensitive of Renaissance writers—of all writers—to what it means to be an individual self. But he would have agreed with Robert Elliot Fitch’s claim that “the self-centered self is a sickly self”—and, it might be added, a narrow and isolated self. Shakespeare’s plays suggest that the highest fulfillment of the self is found not in complete autonomy or absolute freedom from all connection or constraint, but in the free offering of the self to others. Most often, especially in the great moments of reunion and reconciliation, these “others” are linked to the self by the ties of marriage and family.

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References
1 In the edition I am using the phrase reads “the holy cords . . . / Which are t’ intrinsic t’ unloose” (Lear 2.2.74–75). This and all subsequent Shakespearean quotations refer to act, scene, and line and are from William Shakespeare, The Riverside Shakespeare, 2nd ed., ed. G. Blakemore Evans, J. J. M. Tobin, et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).
5 Stone, note 4, above, 7, 171.
10 Ibid. at 220.
11 Ibid. at 228–29.
12 The first phrase is from “The Epistle Dedicatoria” to The Holy Bible (King James Version, 1611), Sig. A2v: The next six phrases, quoted by Shuger, note 10, above, 219, 221, 222, are from Thomas Becon, Richard Hooker, and John Calvin. The last two are from Shakespeare (Much Ado 4.1.74) and John Newnham, Newnams Nightewe. A Bird that Bredeth Braules in Many Families and Housholds (London, 1592), 9.
13 Newnham, note 13, above, at 3.
14 Shuger, note 10, above, at 235 n. 58, 222.
15 Ibid. at 234–35.
20 Perkins, note 18, above, 427.
21 Smith, note 19, above, 51–52.