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WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

One of the guiding assumptions of Alexander Pruss' *One Body*¹ is that love and marriage are intimately linked, to the extent that the absence of love in a marriage would render the marriage something far less than it could, and ought to, be. And by 'love', Pruss means—in part, not exclusively—'romantic love', where this (roughly put) is the kind of love that typically consists in a profound attachment, often displayed affectively (e.g., through sexual union), between two people. The response I wish to make was, in effect, already made in 1984 by Tina Turner, when she sang "What's Love Got To Do With It?"

What, I think, Pruss fails to notice is how distinctly *modern* his conception of marriage is. And for someone who is attempting to develop "a particular, coherent *Christian* sexual ethic,"² as he puts it, this is somewhat peculiar, albeit understandable and even excusable given our current climate. And what climate is this? Well, it is a climate where it is *de rigueur* to uphold the *love of love*. I don't, of course, mean Christian, agapaic love, which is other-centred, sacrificial, committed, loyal and resilient. Rather, I mean romantic love: the kind of love you might feel for someone "at first sight"; an instant and intense attraction you could frequently fall into and out of; an emotion that could overwhelm your entire being, overtaking your capacity to judge your beloved, blindly idealizing them; the kind of love that can even drive you to self-destruction and suicide if circumstances or the object of your love render a union (or marriage) impossible, as with Greek tragedy's

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¹ Alexander R. PRUSS, *One Body: An Essay in Christian Sexual Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012).

² PRUSS, *One Body*, 2, emphasis added.

most celebrated pair of doomed young lovers, Sophocles' Antigone and Haemon. Romantic love, like many other things in our society, has become a secular religion providing for some people the only form of transcendence available in the wake of the death of God. But the dangers of love, especially love romanticized and idealized, are thereby too easily forgotten. Hence Epicurus' statement: "A wise man will not fall in love."³

Hence also the *traditional Christian* practice of not making marriage rest or depend heavily on love. If Pruss is seeking to remain faithful to the deliverances of Christian tradition on love and marriage, then it seems that much of what he assumes about the indissoluble connection between romantic love and marital love is placed under question.

I cannot provide a detailed defence of this view within the short space of this paper, but allow me to offer some considerations, mainly of an historical but also philosophical nature, in its support.

J.K. Campbell, in his fascinating work, *Honour, Family and Patronage: A Study of Institutions and Moral Value in a Greek Mountain Community*,⁴ describes and analyzes various facets of a provincial, sheep grazing community of Sarakatsani (in Zagori, a mountainous area of Epirus, north-western Greece), as he experienced it during fieldwork there in 1954 and 1955. One of his many interesting findings is *the absence of romance prior to marriage*:

Despite the contrary testimony of love songs, romantic courtship is impossible. 'The songs tell lies', the Sarakatsani say. Virtually all marriages are arranged. It would be shameful for a man or girl to express any preference, and they have

³ A note on terminology: Pruss does not define 'agape' (love) in the way I have, as a form or kind of love, but rather takes *agape* as love itself and as something capable of manifesting itself in many forms, such as filial love and romantic love (*One Body*, 12–13). On Pruss' view, then, romantic love is a particular form that *agape* may assume. On my conception, by contrast, romantic love is a different variety of love than agapaic love, though the two might overlap in certain respects. But nothing of substance hangs on this terminological difference: where I speak of romance, this must be understood as a reference to what Pruss is thinking of as the specifically romantic, non-agapaic dimension of romantic love.

For Pruss' account of romantic love, see pp. 82–87 of *One Body*, where "romantic love is distinguished from other loves by a tendency to a form of sexual activity" (p. 87). Although I regard this account as being on the right track, it also strikes me as implausibly reductive, for surely there is much more to romantic love (*qua* romantic love) than sexual attraction and activity. To see this, consider the rich phenomenology of romantic love captured by skilled poets and novelists, who adeptly describe the complicated twists and turns that romantic relationships often take, calling forth passion, rapture, excess, desire, etc. (and not simply sexual union).

⁴ Published in 1964 by the Clarendon Press, Oxford.

only to answer the specific question, 'Will you marry this particular man or girl?' It is almost impossible for a girl to refuse the bridegroom of her family's choice if they insist upon it, although it is believed that a good father or brother ought not to force her into marriage against her will. But it is also said that a daughter should be guided by her parents' or brothers' choice, and in the period of the last twenty years I have discovered evidence of only two cases of 'marriage by force' (παντρείά μὲν τῶν ζώοντων). It is more difficult for a father or brother to dictate to a potential bridegroom, but here again, in most cases, unless his feelings are very strongly engaged against a particular girl, the weight of family opinion is likely to persuade him to accept their decision... A marriage is arranged to suit the requirements of the family group, not the individual preference of the youth or maiden.⁵

It is not unusual for couples in this community to have met for the first time only at their betrothal ceremony, and even the engagement period offers no opportunity for getting to know one another in any way, let alone in a way conducive to the development of romantic feelings:

The betrothal contract amongst the Sarakatsani...is an agreement between families rather than individuals. The groom contracts to marry a certain man's daughter whose face he may never have seen rather than a particular person of the opposite sex.⁶

During the months which pass between the betrothal and the day of the marriage...there is no communication between the two groups.⁷

In case that isn't repugnant enough for modern sensibilities, enculturated as they are with ideals of romance, Campbell reports that he often found *the absence of romantic love even after marriage* amongst the Sarakatsani. (Of course, the cynical amongst us will cry out: 'We have known that all along, and that's precisely why we don't get married!' But that is to miss my point, which is that romantic love *was not expected* in conjugal relationships, or any relationships between a man and a woman.) On the absence of romantic attachment and affection amongst newly weds, Campbell observed:

During the early months of the marriage the young husband gives the minimum of overt public attention to his bride. He may, in stern, almost harsh, tones, make some simple request of her for food and drink or dry clothes, but he does not make conversation.⁸

⁵ CAMPBELL, *Honour, Family and Patronage*, 124–25.

⁶ CAMPBELL, *Honour, Family and Patronage*, 127.

⁷ CAMPBELL, *Honour, Family and Patronage*, 132.

⁸ CAMPBELL, *Honour, Family and Patronage*, 65.

Campbell explains that, in these early days, “The husband’s obligations and affections are still entirely contained within his own family of origin,” and so he offers little or no affective interest to his bride.⁹ Similarly, speaking of the first six nights of the marriage, Campbell writes about the husband: “There is no question at this stage of his having any affection for his bride.”¹⁰ Even if affection develops later, as no doubt it will to some degree, especially with the birth and rearing of children, what Campbell highlights is that romance or romantic-like affection is not commonly there from the beginning.

In case this is dismissed as an isolated or idiosyncratic example, perhaps one that does not properly reflect a Christian understanding of marriage, a similar and stronger case can be made on the basis of *premodern Christian* practice. There is much to choose from here, but given my background in Orthodox Christianity I’d like to briefly focus on *Byzantine* views on love and marriage. Even here the field is variegated and complex, and so I will be required to be more specific still and concentrate on the matter of the consent of the bride and groom. I choose to concentrate on this because the lack of any such meaningful consent will show that the Byzantines, as much as the Sarakatsani, did not make romantic love a precondition for entering into or sustaining a marriage relationship.

The official Christian view is that consent is necessary for marriage to be valid. As Pruss states, “the Christian tradition does not recognize involuntary marriages.”¹¹ In line with this view, it has been held that, during the Byzantine period, “the consent of the bride and groom, and often of their parents or guardians, was necessary for marriage, although in romances marriages were sometimes performed without parental approval.”¹² In *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, John Meyendorff has similarly noted that

Freedom of choice and decision is the first condition of true Christian marriage, which Orthodox canonical tradition tries to maintain. There are several

⁹ CAMPBELL, *Honour, Family and Patronage*, 66.

¹⁰ CAMPBELL, *Honour, Family and Patronage*, 66.

¹¹ PRUSS, *One Body*, 215.

¹² Judith HERRIN and Alexander KAZHDAN, “Marriage,” in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1305. But note the definition of ‘consent’ provided by Angeliki Laiou: “Consent can be stated and conscious, or it can simply mean the absence of objection. Which of these was recognized [in Byzantium] as valid consent? Insofar as marriage was concerned, absence of opposition was considered tantamount to consent.” (Angeliki E. LAIOU, “Sex, Consent, and Coercion in Byzantium,” in *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies*, ed. Angeliki E. Laiou, Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1993, 156).

canons against forceful abduction of women, which also nullify marriages concluded against their will (St. Basil, canons 22 and 30).¹³

But the disingenuous nature of such statements is given away by Meyendorff himself when, in the very next paragraph, he points out that the Byzantine Church “admits the ages of 14 and 12, for men and women respectively, as the lowest age limit for marriage.”¹⁴ This raises the question: What degree of autonomy could a 12-year-old girl, or a 14-year-old boy, have in entering upon a marriage?

In actual fact, however, the situation was more complicated than Meyendorff lets on, as he only discloses the ages of *marriage*, not the ages of *betrothal*. With respect to the latter, Angeliki Laiou writes that,

...according to the law [in Byzantium], a simple engagement could be made when the girl (or the boy) was seven years old, but it could not be confirmed by a church ceremony until the age of thirteen for the girl and fourteen for the boy.¹⁵

Thus, Byzantine law forbade, before the age of thirteen, both marriage and engagement accompanied by a church ceremony. What was not forbidden, however, was a simple betrothal, without a ceremony, and this indeed was a widespread practice, as Alice-Mary Talbot observes:

For most girls in Byzantium, childhood came to an abrupt end with the onset of puberty, which was usually soon followed by betrothal and marriage. Early marriage and procreation of children was the norm in Byzantium; the only alternative for teenage girls was entrance into a convent. Byzantine legislation originally permitted betrothal of a girl after the age of seven, a figure later raised to twelve. The laws were frequently ignored, however, and children as young as five years old might become engaged. The minimum age for marriage was twelve for girls and fourteen for boys, but the more normal age at marriage may have been closer to fifteen and twenty respectively. Very rarely we read of women marrying in their twenties.¹⁶

¹³ John MEYENDORFF, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 48. Meyendorff proceeds to add: “There are also texts which require a sufficiently long period to elapse between betrothal and marriage; legally assimilated with marriage and protected as such, this period obviously served as a test for the decision itself (cf. Sixth Ecumenical Council, or ‘Quinisext,’ canon 98).” (p.48) See also LAIOU, “Sex, Consent, and Coercion in Byzantium,” 178–79, for cases where the marriage was dissolved because the groom had not freely consented to the marriage.

¹⁴ MEYENDORFF, *Marriage: An Orthodox Perspective*, 48. It seems the same applied in the medieval West: see Henrietta LEYSER, *Medieval Women: A Social History of Women in England, 450–1500* (London: Phoenix, 2002), 108.

¹⁵ LAIOU, “Sex, Consent, and Coercion in Byzantium,” 169.

¹⁶ Alice-Mary TALBOT, “Women,” in *The Byzantines*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p.121. See also Averil CAMERON, *The Byzantines* (Ox-

I do not wish to become mired in the specifics about ages of betrothal and marriage. My concern here is with the overall picture that emerges from these historical accounts. Specifically, the age at which most people married, and even more so the age at which they were betrothed, was very low—at least in comparison with contemporary standards. So low in fact that any genuine autonomy and consent would have been absent or negligible. If, for example, one is betrothed at five years of age, then (regardless of the age they marry) there can be no question of exercising any meaningful autonomy and consent with respect to such decisions as whether to enter into marriage and whom to marry. That is why today we would tend to regard such marriages not simply as arranged, but as *forced*.

This brings me to Laiou's comment that,

Forced marriage, then, was one area in which the question of free consent was considered important by the Byzantines, and where consent given under duress would invalidate the marriage. The matter did not, as far as I know, give rise to much debate, perhaps because the law was quite unambiguous: no marriage could be valid that was not undertaken with the consent of the future spouses and those who had them under their authority.¹⁷

I suspect that even a seasoned Byzantine scholar like Laiou has missed the complexity of consent in Byzantine marriage. For how could children (especially those betrothed under 13 years of age) be considered to have given their consent to the relationship? It might be more accurate to say that marital decisions rested primarily with the parents or guardians, while their children would be given some veto power (e.g., a girl might insist on taking monastic vows) but certainly not anything resembling robust or full-blooded consent. Laiou herself has noted that the consent of the parents or guardians, rather than the consent of the bride and groom, seemed to have been the crucial factor. Byzantine jurists, for example, held that if a man seduces his fiancée before her 13th year, then *the decision is up to the parents* as to whether the betrothal should stand or be dissolved.¹⁸ What this indicates is

ford: Blackwell, 2006), 121. Although I would certainly not condone teenage marriage today, it is important to bear in mind the reasons why teenage marriage was the norm in Byzantine times: (i) great emphasis was placed on the virginity of the bride; (ii) the desire to make the most of the childbearing years (particularly in light of the high rate of infant mortality, which meant that women had to bear many children to ensure the survival of a few), and (iii) the life expectancy of women averaged at about 35, and so most would want to marry early and give birth while young. (See TALBOT, "Women," 121.)

¹⁷ LAIOU, "Sex, Consent, and Coercion in Byzantium," 179.

¹⁸ See LAIOU, "Sex, Consent, and Coercion in Byzantium," 172, note 30.

that a quite different understanding of consent was at play here, compared to the way this notion is understood in contemporary Western society. In particular, it seems that consent was largely a communal, specifically a familial, affair, not a matter of individual or personal choice. So, if the father of the family decided that his daughter should marry person X, then that would have been regarded as the will of the whole family, the daughter included.¹⁹ There was no need to obtain the approval of each member of the family. This, of course, did not mean that the daughter who was given in marriage could not resist, but it does indicate that her personal assent to the marriage was not deemed necessary or important.²⁰

Such attitudes are not, of course, the unique preserve of the Byzantines. In ancient Greece, the family took precedence before the individual, and so when a man married he did not so much as marry his wife as marry *into her family*. Campbell similarly notes that, in the Sarakatsani community, “people do not ask whom a man has married, but whose daughter has he taken.”²¹ As this illustrates, the values of a society upon which their marriage practices are based can vary quite drastically from one era to another. Where we hope or expect to encounter romantic love amongst a (happily) married couple, no such expectations were entertained during Byzantine times. That is why the notion of a girl as young as seven given over in marriage, by her father, posed no problems for the Byzantine mind. It’s worth recalling, also, that Byzantium was a thoroughly Christianized culture, and so it won’t do to dismiss these practices as arising from debased Christian or non-Christian values.

¹⁹ See Gillian CLARK, *Women in Late Antiquity: Pagan and Christian Life-Styles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), who observes that: “Under Roman law, a child was in the *potestas*—that is power to take actions which have an effect in law—of his or her father until the father died; so the child could not independently contract a valid marriage. In the words of Basil of Caesarea, ‘marriage without the consent of the power-holders is fornication’ [Letter 199.42, PG 32.729]. A girl could refuse to marry the man her father chose only if he was unworthy in status or behaviour.” (pp. 14–15)

²⁰ It seems that the only women in Byzantium who had complete autonomy with respect to choice of partner (and so did not require the consent of parents or other family members) were the empresses. Lynda Garland writes: “Certainly at the Imperial level women frequently had total social and political independence, whatever conventions of behaviour the sources chose to attribute to them. Empresses, married, unmarried or widowed, associated unhindered with courtiers and were free to make their own choice of lovers or husbands.” (“Life and Ideology of Byzantine Women,” *Byzantion* 58 (1988): 391) But this was unusual, and so it is the exception that proves the rule; though perhaps widows with no family members alive had a similar degree of autonomy.

²¹ CAMPBELL, *Honour, Family and Patronage*, 124.

Pruss devotes some attention to arranged marriage,²² arguing that romantic love (especially fully matured romantic love) is not a prerequisite for entering into a marriage, though it is essential during the course of marriage. As he puts it, “It is not so much wrong to marry someone that one does not love, as it is wrong not to love the person one marries.”²³ I assume, given the context, that by ‘love’ here Pruss means, in part, romantic love. If Pruss is right, then an entire Christian civilisation (that of the Byzantine East, though the medieval West would also fall into this category) must be regarded as condoning and practicing an immoral (or perhaps confused or ‘wrong’ in some significance sense) form of marriage. For, as discussed earlier, romantic love was no part of the pre-married relationship of the groom and bride (if there was any such relationship to speak of in the first place). Further, once we take into account the relatively young age at which the bride and groom would have married, their lack of genuine autonomy and choice about when and whom to marry, and the ambivalent or unfavourable status accorded by Byzantine society at large to romantic love in comparison with agapaic forms of love, it is highly implausible to think that romantic love played an important part even during marriage. This also is the view of Byzantine scholars, such as Alice-Mary Talbot:

As in other societies in which betrothals are arranged by the parents, couples in Byzantium had no expectation of romantic love in marriage but viewed their union as a sacrament ordained by God for the perpetuation of the family and, secondarily, as the merger of the economic assets of two families.²⁴

This is not to deny the existence of romantic love in Byzantium, and in similar cultures.²⁵ Then, as now, the appetite for romance was present, as evinced in the fictional stories (or ‘romances’), produced intermittently over the course of the Byzantine empire and revived in the twelfth century, de-

²² PRUSS, *One Body*, 257–59.

²³ PRUSS, *One Body*, 258.

²⁴ Talbot, “Women”, 127. Pruss comes close to endorsing this medieval (or ‘minimal’, many would now say) conception of marriage as primarily directed towards procreation. This follows from: (i) Pruss’ view of conjugal love as a form (indeed, the most mature form) of romantic love (see, e.g., *One Body*, 211); (ii) his tendency (as indicated in note 1 above) to reduce romantic love to sexual union, and (iii) his conception of sexual union as a mutual union that strives towards reproduction (see ch. 5 of *One Body*). I have no wish to endorse such a view of marriage, despite my emphasis in the present paper on the ‘dangers of love’.

²⁵ Note, for example, Talbot’s comment that, “For the most part the arranged marriage seems to have worked well, and often true affection and even love developed between husband and wife.” (“Women”, 127).

picting the adventures of lovers and the hazards they overcome together. The best-known of these is the epic romance, *Digenis Akritas* (dating possibly from the first half of the twelfth century), which tells the story of Digenis Akritas, a valiant young man who falls in love with a girl and abducts her (or, according to another interpretation, elopes with her), but the two later get married. Even if it is questionable whether such stories are indicative of Byzantine attitudes towards love and marriage,²⁶ it would have been psychologically impossible for romantic feelings not to well up, occasionally at least, over the course of many a marriage. Romantic love, however, was not held up as an ideal or criterion for a successful marriage.

And it's not difficult to see why romantic love was not sought after within marriage in societies which accorded much greater value to tradition, fidelity, stability and community, than to innovation, change and the freedoms of the individual. For, given the passions, emotions and excesses associated with romantic love, this form of love inevitably has a destabilising effect on relationships and by extension on the wider community. Consider in this context the oft-made connection between love and madness, or 'crimes of passion' where romantic love turns into murderous hatred. The hatred in fact is often proportionate to the intensity of the previous love: the greater 'the torrents of love', the greater the potential for cruelty and hatred, enmity and exclusion, or simply sadness and depression.

It's no surprise, then, to find the tendency to disregard romantic love as irrelevant in marriage, or to denigrate it as dangerous, prevalent in ancient as well as medieval societies. Lisa Appignanesi, in *All About Love: Anatomy of An Unruly Emotion*, writes:

Though there may have been instances when citizen marriages were sparked by passion – and indeed Greek literature here and there expresses a wish for love in marriage – scholars largely agree that “the purpose of marriage was to engender and rear legitimate children...rather than to gratify the emotional needs of either husband or wife.” Athens was “a society which denied the validity of love as the basis for a happily married life.”²⁷

²⁶ Laiou, for example, contends that, “In the aristocratic society of the twelfth century, marriage was a highly regulated activity, and all that a romance such as *Digenis* provided was catharsis, and one devoid of risk at that.” (“Sex, Consent, and Coercion in Byzantium,” 206–207).

²⁷ Lisa APPIGNANESI, *All About Love: Anatomy of An Unruly Emotion* (London: Virago Press, 2011), 114. The first quote refers to P.G. McC. Brown, “Love and Marriage in Greek New Comedy,” *Classical Quarterly* 43 (1993): 189–205. The second quote refers to Peter

Christianity, to be sure, elevated love to new heights, but it was love in its agapaic rather than romantic form that was sanctified. The model here is the love of God embodied in the incarnation of Christ, a ‘frightening’ love given the horrors it permits or endures (crucifixion and death), and thus far from romantic.²⁸ Such notions profoundly influenced medieval Christian attitudes to relationships of love, including marriage, as I have tried to indicate through the example of Byzantium. These attitudes survived well beyond the medieval period, though they are rarely found nowadays. Montaigne, for instance, would not have been going counter to the values of sixteenth-century French Renaissance society when he wrote that:

A good marriage (if there be such a thing) rejects the company of Cupid: it strives to reproduce those of loving-friendship. It is a pleasant fellowship for life, full of constancy, trust and an infinity of solid useful services and mutual duties. No wife who has ever savoured its taste would ever wish to be the beloved mistress of her husband. If she is lodged in his affection as a wife then her lodging is far more honourable and secure.²⁹

As these quotations suggest, marriage has not always been viewed as requiring romance, even within traditional Christian societies such as the Byzantine Empire. In these societies, the marital union was undergirded not by romantic love (or allied phenomena such as passion, pleasure, or desire), but by shared values and hopes, particularly such ideals as mutual respect and concern, the production of progeny, and the protection of property and status. If romantic love did enter into the marriage, it was a benefit that was secondary and subordinate, albeit fortunate. Grand passions were lived outside the bonds of marriage – above all, in the desert or the monastery, where one became ‘inflamed’ with the love of God.³⁰

Walcot, “Romantic Love and True Love: Greek Attitudes to Marriage,” *Ancient Society* 18 (1987): 5–33.

²⁸ I borrow the term ‘frightening love’ from Andrew Gleeson’s recent book, *A Frightening Love: Recasting the Problem of Evil* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2012).

²⁹ MONTAIGNE, *Complete Essays*, trans. M.A. Screech (London: Allen Lane, 1991), 961; quoted in Appignanesi, *All About Love*, p.112.

³⁰ See Averil CAMERON, “Sacred and Profane Love: Thoughts on Byzantine Gender,” in *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (London: Routledge, 1997), 1–23, where it is shown how the language of passion, love and eros was transferred, in Byzantine times, from the human realm to the religious sphere.

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CO MIŁOŚĆ MA Z TYM WSPÓLNEGO?

Streszczenie

W artykule polemizuję ze stanowiącym osnowę publikacji Alexandra Prussa *One Body* zasadniczym założeniem, że małżeństwo jest ściśle związane z miłością, w tym z miłością romantyczną. To założenie, jak argumentuję, wypływa po części z wyraźnie współczesnego rozumienia małżeństwa. Pokazuję, że w tym względzie stanowisko Prussa klóci się z poglądem na małżeństwo i praktyką małżeńską z czasów przednowoczesnych, w szczególności z ujęciem chrześcijańskim okresu Cesarstwa Bizantyńskiego, gdy małżeństwo nie opierało się na miłości (romantycznej). Wreszcie podaję pewne przykłady, które pokazują, dlaczego w średniowiecznej kulturze chrześcijańskiej romantyczna miłość nie była związana z instytucją małżeństwa.

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Summary

This paper contests an important assumption guiding Alexander Pruss' *One Body*, that marriage is intimately connected with love, including romantic love. This assumption, I argue, is the product in part of a distinctively modern understanding of marriage. To show this, Pruss' position is set against the premodern, and in particular the Byzantine Christian, view and practice of marriage, where marriage was not grounded to any significant extent on (romantic) love. Finally, some indication is provided as to why romantic love was disassociated from marriage in medieval Christian culture.

Słowa kluczowe: miłość romantyczna, małżeństwo, J.K. Campbell, Bizancjum.

Key words: romantic love, marriage, J.K. Campbell, Byzantium.

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