Love and Death?

In Richard Wagner’s opera Tristan and Isolde, Tristan sings of his yearning for “death’s bliss” (Todeswonne), meaning the joy of dying with his lover, Isolde. She, in turn, testifies of the “utmost rapture” (höchste Lust) of dying beside Tristan, and both join in lauding “sweet death, yearned for, longed for death-in-love!” Wagner felt he had captured the essence of the legend.

Poppycock, says Joan Grimbert, a CUA professor of French language and literature.

Grimbert is a scholar of the medieval legend of Tristan and Isolde, frequently called the greatest romance of all time, whose oldest extant version was penned in Norman French in 12th-century England. From there, versions of the story were soon written in German, Old Norse, Icelandic, Italian, Spanish, Czech and Belorussian. It was something of a medieval best-seller.

Dubbed a foundational myth of the Western world, this story concerns a Cornish nobleman and Irish princess’ accidental drinking of a love potion and their resulting adulterous affair and deception of the man who is both Isolde’s husband and Tristan’s uncle and liege lord. The tale is not only a progenitor of subsequent literature celebrating romantic love, it is also alive in our own day, inspiring the 2006 feature film “Tristan and Isolde,” John Updike’s 1994 novel Brazil, Joyce Carol Oates’ 1995 novel You Can’t Catch Me, and recent books of Jungian psychology.

Most of the versions of the tale from the late 1800s to today, however, follow Wagner’s 1865 opera in portraying Tristan and Isolde as yearning to escape the constraints of society and to die together as the culmination and climax of their love.

The problem with that — as Professor Grimbert has said in public lectures and on radio shows — is that in the medieval versions of the legend, the two lovers don’t desire death, don’t desire to escape society, and do everything they can to maintain and fulfill their roles in society while also secretly continuing their affair.

It seems that the Romantic spirit, whether in the 19th century or today, can’t resist the intoxicating theme of sex and death pursued in order to escape the confines of this world. Even many of the scholars who study the medieval world have been drawn to the false conception that the legend is about the inextricable link between love and death, according to Grimbert.

Au contraire, she says: The upper-class people of medieval Europe who made the legend one of the biggest hits of their time weren’t captivated by Wagner’s theme of the eros of death, but rather by another theme: the desire to be able to choose the person you will marry or otherwise romantically pursue. It’s a freedom Americans take for granted, but in the medieval world in which the legend was composed, upper-class marriages were arranged, and were based on socioeconomic reasons rather than romantic attraction.

People still had romantic feelings toward different individuals, however, Grimbert points out, and they thrilled to read about Tristan and Isolde, who — with the excuse of the love potion — transgressed the taboos of their day in pursuit of passionate love.

“In the oldest version of the story that has been preserved, the author even makes it clear that God is on the lovers’ side, largely because it wasn’t their intention to drink the potion,” says Grimbert.

“We assume that the Church looked askance at the legend,” she adds. “The greatest indication of that is that the early manuscripts of the legend are in so many fragments.” In other words, the Church may have been trying to keep the manuscripts from being preserved or copied.

Grimbert’s research into Tristan and Isolde takes her around the world, literally and figuratively — to track down a 12th-century image of Tristan sculpted onto a pillar in a Spanish cathedral, research the spread of the legend throughout medieval Europe, provide expert commentary on Welsh and Australian radio shows, and search out modern literary references to the legend.

The editor of Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook (Garland Publishing, 1995) and other books about medieval French literature, Grimbert “is one of the four or five most knowledgeable and best respected Tristan scholars in the world,” says Norris Lacy, professor of French and medieval studies at Pennsylvania State University. “I believe that any scholar who’s knowledgeable in the field would think immediately of her if asked to name the most influential voice in Tristan studies.” — R.W.