



Pygmalion meets Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Pygmalion and Popular Culture: Paula James

Commentary:

Dr Paula James is Senior Lecturer in Classical Studies at the Open University. Her research interests include the retellings of myth, and particularly the Pygmalion myth in popular culture.

Paula:

I thought with the episode 'I Was Made to Love You' that Warren creating robot girlfriend April for his private use and pleasure was a lovely kind of direct retelling of the myth of Pygmalion in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. There are differences obviously, but just in the very main storyline there is April, a beautiful girl who just seems to be there for private consumption for Warren, but she actually gets launched out into the local community and then interesting things start to happen. So although it's a retelling for me of the Pygmalion myth, it's also a kind of a 'what if', what if the statue in Pygmalion had a choice and had a voice, what might have happened?

Commentary:

And observing the parallels and the contrasts with Pygmalion sharpens our perception of both the original myth and its retelling.

Paula:

I think that April has all the poignancy that we would feel the statue would have if she could speak to us in Ovid. April is pretty. She's perfect in a sense that she's the perfect girlfriend. She utters words like 'good girlfriends don't cry'. She's obviously something that her creator, Warren, thinks is going to satisfy his every need but, in fact, doesn't in the storyline of the Buffy episode. Now we have no sense in Pygmalion that he is disappointed with his creation in any way, quite the reverse. She's brought to life by divine intervention. He immediately impregnates her, thus really gaining his own immortality in a traditional way, whereas he could have had immortality by showing off this wondrous artwork, it is so lifelike, it is so beautiful. It is a wonderful statue but he keeps it to himself so, and in bringing it to life, of course, he's giving it mortality and it will die, so artistic immortality is something that he sacrifices.

Commentary:

Both Ovid's Pygmalion and the episode 'I Was Made to Love You' are about a creator and his creature. In both of them one character was created solely for the purposes of another.

Paula:

We do have some rather nice, or really not so nice, rather nasty parallels between April and the statue, Pygmalion's statue, because Pygmalion's statue is definitely wooed by Pygmalion. Warren has controlled everything in April, and you see her programming towards the end of the episode, and you see all these positions, sexual positions that Warren has actually designed and programmed for her. And with Pygmalion he's treating his statue, he really is deceiving himself that she can feel, that she can be sexually moved. The Latin word actually can mean not just moving physically, but being sexually moved. He imagines she can, so he dresses her – who knows if he undresses her – he dresses her up, he sort of touches her up, if you like, although that's a bit of a bad pun, but he is bringing her little presents and little gifts, and treating her as the mistress who is able to be seduced, and of course he is actually treating her as an enlivened being while she is still a statue.

Commentary:

In some ways 'I Was Made to Love You' can be seen as part of a long continuum of literary, theatrical and cinematic retellings of the Pygmalion myth.

Paula:

Pygmalion, like many of Ovid's myths, has become really a leitmotif for all kinds of different sorts of text and media where you're talking about either creating something artificial, or making over anything of unpromising material and it might be an existing human being, woman or even man, into something that is your ideal. So this kind of storyline, I suppose one of the most well known ones would be George Bernard Shaw's Pygmalion, and then later 'My Fair Lady', where I suppose it's almost a reverse thing that's happening because you take something common and, as I say, unpromising in its material and it gets distanced and put on a kind of a pedestal. The other interesting thing about retellings like Shaw's Pygmalion and also are played by W.S. Gilbert of Gilbert & Sullivan, called 'Pygmalion and Galatea', is this issue of whether the creator himself is emotionally ossified and creating something artificial reveals what true humanity is like.

Commentary:

And to what extent does the character Warren in 'I Was Made to Love You' follow on in this tradition?

Paula:

It's not that Warren's rejected available partners, which perhaps Pygmalion has to create something perfect and innocent, and guaranteed virginal, maybe available partners have rejected Warren because he's the geeky, computer scientist kind of character, so Warren has to create a girlfriend because he can't get one, which is all rather sad, so we could feel quite sympathetic towards Warren, except that he has no sense of responsibility for that creation.

Commentary:

Paula James sees this as the ethical core of this particular retelling of the Pygmalion myth.

Paula:

I think at the most basic level a feminist perspective upon both April and the statue is one of outrage that you can have even an idea of something of perfection in a woman, wanting her to live up to your ideal, or even cultural ideals of the time, and create her with that kind of model in mind, and then to refuse to have any responsibility for the consequences. Well we can't say Pygmalion rejects his statue at all. He embraces his statue in both senses of the word, whereas Warren actually allows his creation to die, and is hoping her batteries will just run down and she'll be out of his life forever. But there are consequences to this kind of act of creation. One has to look at the surround stories in Ovid, not just the Pygmalion story. One of the later descendants of the statue and Pygmalion, Myrrha, falls in love with father, Cinyras, King of Cyprus, and contrives to sleep with him and produce a child by him, and this is seen as a terrible story. She has acted completely beyond the pale, outside of any moral boundaries and yet Ovid, with his usual mischief we might say, is forcing you to look back and think, but wait a minute, Pygmalion slept with his creation so this is actually a distasteful story, it's not such a perfect pure story about an artist who gets his just reward.

Commentary:

So how successful did Paula James find this episode of Buffy the Vampire Slayer?

Paula:

I think what I gained from the Buffy episode, and I have often found this with modern and popular culture texts, whether they're cinematic, literary or painting, artistic in that sense, is you do go back to your source and it starts either illuminating it or making you ask other questions about the original. I like the episode of April partly because it did resonate, tie in so much with the kind of research I was doing on descendants of Pygmalion's statue and the implication of creating something, and then having a responsibility for the creation. It's successful again I think in terms of developing Buffy, moving her on from this idea that she must somehow change herself to get a boyfriend and she must become more normal. It counterposes and, in a way, compares both Buffy and April as uncanny creatures, although Buffy's not synthetic, she's not normal, and she seems to be created for a particular purpose which can be a great obstacle to her personal happiness, and often her development, that she is the slayer and she has this role. So in terms of not just ethical issues, but in terms of the narrative arc and where the story goes later, I found it really successful, although I suppose perhaps just a random viewing of it, it will perhaps not be quite so impressive, and

as audiences become more and more sophisticated maybe they find the message of 'you don't have to be a perfect girlfriend' done with a bit of a sledgehammer in producing a robot April to show Buffy the way.