



Pygmalion meets Buffy the Vampire Slayer

Pygmalion and Popular Culture: Lorna Jowett

Penny Boreham:

Dr Lorna Jowett is Senior Lecturer in Media, English and Culture at the University of Northampton. She has a particular research interest in how gender is represented on popular television.

Lorna Jowett:

I think one of my favourite quotations about Buffy from its producers is - this is when they went to the spin-off show 'Angel' which took on some of Buffy's characters - that Buffy was about how hard it was to be a woman, and Angel was about how hard it was to be a man - and I think if we're looking at Buffy in those terms that the show is about how hard it is to be a woman. It's not just about one gender identity as this is feminine, or this is female, it's about multiple versions of femininity. So in this one episode we might argue that maybe we've got two contrasting versions of femininity though, in fact, we've got far more than that because there's a whole range of other female characters too. But it's obviously part of the project of the show is to try and continually compare and contrast, and renegotiate these different versions of what femininity is or might be at any one time.

Penny Boreham:

Different characters can represent different gender identities.

Lorna Jowett:

One thing it seems we're supposed to take from the episode is that Buffy and April are opposites in some senses, but very similar in other senses, so that Buffy is active, independent, she's a kind of, you know, contemporary, post-modern heroine, some people have talked about her as a feminist icon even though that might be going too far. April, on the other hand, is obviously a much more passive figure. She's been constructed to perform a particular gender identity. She doesn't have the kind of autonomy that Buffy seems to display, yet at the same time, both Buffy and April display particular anxieties about romance, heterosexual romance, and whether they need to have a man.

Penny Boreham:

For Lorna Jowett the values shown in popular television series like Buffy the Vampire Slayer can provide vital clues about the values of the society that produces it. And even something as seemingly straightforward as gender can be laden with a society's values.

Lorna Jowett:

Sex in the biological sense and gender aren't necessarily equated. It means that gender is fluid, it's always contingent on various factors, that gender identity, and I suppose this is part of a post-modern understanding of identity in general, identity's never stable, it's never fixed, you know, you're not born as this and that's who you are for the rest of your life, so gender identity can be as fluid as all kinds of other aspects of your identity.

Penny Boreham:

And characters can exhibit different aspects of their gender identity in different situations.

Lorna Jowett:

April obviously comes across in a lot of senses as passive but there is another side to her and I think this is another way in which she can be compared with, rather than contrasted to Buffy, you know she has this combat mode and we're never told quite why she's been given a combat mode but she has it. So when she's threatened, or even when her relationship, her loyalty to Warren is threatened, she becomes very aggressive. She throws Spike out of the window at the party after he approaches her, she reacts strongly to Katrina when Katrina tells

April that, you know, she's Warren's girlfriend, so April can in an odd kind of way be seen as a strong woman. She's not an independent female character but she has this strength. Of course, the strength is programmed to Warren's directives so in one sense her strength is about preserving her relationship with Warren and, if you like, the purity of that relationship, so it's not as it might have been in previous times about preserving her purity in terms of preserving her virginity, but it's about preserving a kind of monogamous relationship, and again I think it's there to parallel Buffy definitely, because Buffy's already talked in this episode about how her amazing super powers and strengths can, you know, basically put off boys. I think there's an interesting contradiction here that strong women are seen to be both attractive and threatening at the same time. At one time perhaps they might just have been threatening, or they might have shifted from suddenly from being attractive to being threatening; here they kind of managed to be both at the same time.

Penny Boreham:

But April is after all not a woman but a robot, and like Pygmalion's sculpture she's built to a specification that's been decided entirely by her creator.

Lorna Jowett:

In some senses she's obviously a fairly conventional kind of femininity – the pink dress, the way that she looks, all those things – and she's not, she's not your kind of typically sexy babe as some of the other characters in this show are presented immediately as, she's a more kind of girl next door version which kind of, I think, for teen TV probably equates to the angel at the hearth, I mean we're not really talking in those terms any more, and none of these characters you hardly ever, you see them in the kitchen but they never do anything that might be construed as domesticity. But I think it's interesting when you see from April's point of view, so that you get the kind of robotic screen that's got her programming on it, if you're as sad as I am and you pause it at this point and read it all, what you actually see is that the sex programming is about 75% of what's there and, you know, there's one file that says 'listen sympathetically', and another one that's, you know, 'give gifts', and another one that says oh, I don't know, there isn't one that says 'knit sweaters' though she tells Warren at one point she's knitted him four sweaters. So in those terms she's obviously programmed to be what Xander refers to as a sexbot and that's her primary function.

Penny Boreham:

And Lorna Jowett points out that precisely because April has been programmed and is controlled, 'I Was Made to Love You', like other robot stories, raises philosophical questions about some of our fundamental values.

Lorna Jowett:

In robot stories this is mostly about freewill and autonomy and ownership as slavery, I mean robots most often are constructed to do the jobs that other people don't want to do. In this case we could say Warren constructs April to be his girlfriend which nobody else wants to do. There's always an issue, if you like, a kind of moral or ethical issue about slavery and ownership and obviously western societies, and America in particular, has complex histories in those areas, but obviously the kind of current ideology would promote independence and oppose oppression.

Penny Boreham:

Some people have even argued that for the most up-to-date incarnations of the Pygmalion myth, the move from myth to science fiction is a natural one.

Lorna Jowett:

Science is now the dominant discourse for explaining who we are and why we're like this and, you know, what our place is in the world, so that science fiction takes on a lot of the moral and ethical issues that religion and perhaps myth used to explain or debate, or negotiate or discuss. So obviously creation, life, freewill, why we're here, you know the question that April asked at the end – if I can't do the thing I was created what am I here for? These are the kinds of questions that science fiction constantly asks.

Penny Boreham:

And how successful does Lorna Jowett think this episode, 'I Was made to Love You' is, and what is its most engaging aspect?

Lorna Jowett:

In terms of your average Buffy episode it's perhaps not one of my all-time favourites, you know I like the science fiction episodes in Buffy, and I think this works well as a female robot story in terms of all those contexts – control and power, it draws out all these things - but I think one of the most interesting things is and perhaps the fact that it's not one of the all-time best episodes, just shows this more obviously, it's using its fantasy in this sense, you know the kind of science fiction notion of the robot, to directly debate these issues about gender, because the characters start to debate these issues so it uses its fantasy constructs, doesn't matter whether it's robots or whether it's vampires, demons, they're used in their direct ways to talk about issues of gender that you perhaps wouldn't be able to talk about so directly in a show that had a more kind of realistic format.