



## **Pygmalion meets Buffy the Vampire Slayer**

*Pygmalion and Popular Culture: Amanda Potter*

### **Penny Boreham:**

Amanda Potter is a PhD student in the Classics Department of the Open University. She's researching viewers' responses to retellings of classical myth in popular television drama series.

### **Amanda Potter:**

With classics it's a part of everyone's lives, although they might not know it. The original classical myths have been filtered down through other media, often through television and film, and so modern representations are more familiar now I think to people than the old myths themselves.

### **Penny Boreham:**

But how much insight do viewers have into this process? Amanda has actively investigated viewers' reaction to various retellings of classical myths, including this episode of 'Buffy the Vampire Slayer'.

### **Amanda Potter:**

The way I've been working on retellings of myths with viewers is I've recruited a panel of viewers across different areas, so I've recruited people who are classicists, people who are fans of the television series, and also a control group who are neither fans nor classicists, and I've been working with them, watching episodes and getting them to feed back on how they saw the episode and the myth within the episode, either via questionnaires or in a focus group environment.

### **Penny Boreham:**

Viewers' responses to the episode 'I Was Made to Love You' were mixed.

### **Amanda Potter:**

They liked some of the comedy and they liked a lot of the interaction with the main characters of the series so, for example, where April throws Spike out of a window that was clearly a favourite part of the episode for many viewers who knew the series well. Some of my viewers didn't know the series very well and they did find that the story of April as a stand-alone story was very interesting, and had a lot of pathos in it and that April seemed to be quite a sympathetic character. Some people didn't like the character of April interestingly, and I had some feedback that they didn't think the acting was very good. Some people didn't like robot storylines full stop, and so quite a few of my viewers said they didn't like this episode and they didn't particularly like the episode with Ted, a robot who was a surrogate father figure for Buffy. They preferred more of a supernatural rather than a robot storyline and, in fact, a couple of my general viewers, so non-fans, didn't enjoy it at all.

### **Penny Boreham:**

But that didn't stop them from engaging with the programme's central ethical dilemmas.

### **Amanda Potter:**

One of my viewers, Kathy, found that the whole myth was quite creepy because the idea of creating a perfect person for yourself is a very creepy concept. It's not ethical to do that, whether that's in the myth or whether it's in the story of April and 'I Was Made to Love You', and a lot of the viewers believed that this was just something that wasn't the right thing to do, and those that were fans that understood about Warren's character later, particularly Kathy the fan, really thought that this was starting off how Warren would become in the future, so the character of Warren that creates April ends up actually killing his real life girlfriend, Katrina, and so they were looking at the arc of Warren's journey starting here.

**Penny Boreham:**

Amanda Potter was keen to find out how aware viewers were of the episode's classical routes.

**Amanda Potter:**

One of the questions I asked the viewers first was whether after watching the episode they were reminded of any myth or film, or story or work of art and, interestingly, out of the fourteen viewers that took part, only five of them recognised the Pygmalion story. However you could think that that's quite high because it is far removed from the myth, there's no mention of Pygmalion, there's no statue. Of these people four were classicists and one was a fan of the series, and so people are recognising, although they do know that I'm a student of myth and have some clues to think that that's what they're looking for and in the question, so if they knew that myth they would draw parallels with it. More people as well thought of different television programmes which deal with similar subjects, so 'Weird Science', four people thought of that which is an eighties film about some boys creating a girlfriend. Other references were 'Frankenstein', 'My Fair Lady', 'Blade Runner', and a number of other cultural references. Of the classicists only a couple of them quoted Ovid. These were classicists who are students of ancient literature and so were familiar with the text. The others knew of Pygmalion through general sources or had just heard of it, and what I did next was to say the myth I was thinking of was Pygmalion, have you heard of it before if they didn't proactively mention it, and four of the non-classicists had no knowledge of the Pygmalion myth at all, other people had heard of it but didn't know very much about it, and some people quoted the George Bernard Shaw play.

**Penny Boreham:**

Amanda Potter found that for many viewers the impact of this retelling was dependent upon their response to the robot April.

**Amanda Potter:**

The viewers were relating to April as a human being rather than just an artificial robot, and people were likening it to when they have had relationships that have failed, and so our own search for the perfect man or the perfect woman, which is never going to come to fruition, and when April is dying because she can't find a purpose for herself and her own, her whole purpose is to love Warren, if he doesn't love her back people could draw real-life examples from that.

**Penny Boreham:**

Viewers found their feelings about April changing with the unfolding of the story.

**Amanda Potter:**

The majority of viewers, and this is across all types of viewers so fans, general viewers and classicists, have reacted to April to start with, finding her quite an absurd character, a comic character, who's looking for her boyfriend in an inappropriate way, and by the end of the episode their sympathies lie very much with April so, in fact, their sympathies start with Warren who has this inappropriate girlfriend who's stalking him, and by the end of it they realise that actually April's the one to be pitied, so in the majority of cases this is the reaction that viewers have.

**Penny Boreham:**

The scene on the swing is the emotional heart of the retelling of the myth.

**Amanda Potter:**

The main reactions were that this was the death of a character, it wasn't a turning off of a robot, it was really an episode that would instil sympathy and, as I say, they were very sympathetic to her at the end and felt very sorry for her, and it was a sad moment for people.

**Penny Boreham:**

So how successful does Amanda Potter think 'I Was Made to Love You' is as a modern reworking of the 'Pygmalion' myth?

**Amanda Potter:**

From the evidence I've had from my viewers I believe that 'I Was Made to Love You' is a very successful retelling of the Pygmalion story and, in fact, it has a lot in it that Pygmalion doesn't have in Ovid, so a lot of my viewers drew attention to the fact after reading the myth that the woman in Pygmalion myth doesn't have a name, she doesn't have a psychology, it's very difficult to understand what she's feeling, and some of the viewers said, you know, is she happy at all, we don't know, and is April happy in her ignorance of believing that Warren does still love her? Well perhaps she is, but we get a lot more understanding of the character of April from the episode than we get an understanding of Pygmalion's statue from the myth.