



Pygmalion meets Buffy the Vampire Slayer

From Pygmalion to Buffy: re-interpreting myth

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In A330 I talk about a particular episode in Season 5 of a TV series, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, created by Joss Whedon, and I link what's going on in this particular episode with the myth of Pygmalion from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 10.

The way Ovid tells the Pygmalion myth, on first reading it seems fairly straightforward. For many years commentators assumed it was a story of artistry and piety rewarded. Pygmalion sculpts a beautiful ivory statue to be his perfect partner. Pygmalion creates the statue, prays to the goddess Venus for a wife like it, and the statue comes to life under his embrace and his touching. They then marry, one presumes, she certainly is immediately impregnated by Pygmalion, and presumably from then on at this beck and call, the kind of subordinate wife one would expect in the context of Ancient Greece since actually this whole story is set in Cyprus. So we have a fairly uncomplicated view of Pygmalion initially, and then we start to wonder about this story because the descendant of the statue falls in love with her father and fools him into having an incestuous relationship with her, and then you start rethinking about Pygmalion making love to his creation, and the whole narrative or the whole story, or the whole myth, becomes just a little bit more tacky.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer started life as an interesting, but not entirely successful, film in the 1990's and then Joss Whedon, its creator, got the chance to realise this very original idea he had had about a little blonde teenager being a vampire slayer, by having a whole TV series and it actually ran for seven seasons from the late 1990's to early in the 21st century.

One of the things that intrigued me about Buffy, and I think why it appeals to academics and all kinds of different disciplines, is that there are quite a lot of narrative arcs or storylines in it which pull in all kinds of cultural references and allusions from science fiction, from literature on vampires, from art, from cinema and television, traditions themselves, this is what makes it so enjoyable. It's actually set in California in a place called Sunnydale which looks very normal, a normal American suburbia on the surface, but proves to be a little bit like Ovid's world, rather a numinous landscape where all kinds of demons, vampires and strange creatures can stalk the streets.

In Season 5 there's an episode called 'I Was Made to Love You' and it's sort of a one-off in some ways because a character is introduced we don't see again till later in Season 6, and this character is Warren. He's rather a geeky college boy in Sunnydale, and he's a technological wizard, and he creates a girlfriend, he makes a girlfriend, whom he calls April. He then tires of this robot girlfriend because he's found someone real, a real girl, and leaves April in his dorm room, hoping her batteries will run down, but she starts looking for Warren around the streets of Sunnydale.

I thought April was a lovely example of a modern ivory statue. Pygmalion is also an isolated, rather alienated character, as is Warren. They both produce a partner who corresponds to an ideal, although of course ideals are culturally determined so the ivory statue if it has any model at all, it might be the goddess Venus, something perfect and divinely beautiful. With Warren he creates a slightly old fashioned looking, pretty, little girl who could be 'the girl next door' who makes him sweaters, but is also there to be sexually available, and Ovid really suggests as well in the original myth that Pygmalion is dressing, undressing this statue and bringing it little gifts, and treating it like a mistress, like something that is sexually compliant.

And the fascinating thing about all the different versions of Pygmalion that have come down through the centuries in art and literature, and indeed on film, they have the idea of the

tarnished woman somehow lurking in the background, and we know that Pygmalion's not sure what he wants. Does he want this pure virginal woman or does he want the sexually compliant one? And I think Ovid has set us up for this because he's a subtle and sophisticated writer with a lovely sense of mischief, and so this somehow resonates through different versions of the myth and we have it there in April. She is wonderfully innocent when she's looking for Warren, she is artless although she is an artifice, and she's also there to be his sexual partner and work out all the positions, so she's a fetishised female as well, and I do think that that's implied in Ovid.

You wonder if April is going to be another victim, rather like female victims in Ovid's landscape where supernatural creatures can pursue, seduce, and then even punish them for being seduced, or at least their supernatural wives do, and of course Sunnydale is this place which is full of dangers, but April proves able to look after herself physically, she goes into combat mode if anyone threatens her relationship and fidelity to Warren, which is rather amusing in parts of the episode. On the other hand she is pathetically vulnerable because she's only made to love Warren, and for that reason as she shuts down on the swing, even though Buffy has had to fight her, Buffy begins to feel sorry for her, lie to her, try to reassure her that she performed her role well, and as her batteries do give out, April's voice deepens and she starts uttering the little clichés that Warren has given her to say, so you remember that this poor creature you've become rather attached to is actually only Warren. It's part of the narcissism of creating a being and it's there in the Pygmalion story as well.

What's happening in the episode, and this was quite deliberate on the part of Jane Espenson who wrote it, is that April is there as a kind of lesson for Buffy that she doesn't have to have a man to identify her, to define her, she doesn't need to try and be a perfect girlfriend which is what she feels she's always failed to do and is trying to aspire to around this episode and in this particular narrative arc. Ironically, later on in this season, Buffy says she is forgetting how to feel. She thinks she's turning into stone, that her role as a slayer has made her hard, which is a fascinating way of having the metaphor lingering on of stone and flesh, which is also something one finds in the Ovid; this stone to flesh motif is there in Pygmalion, and there in other myths, in fact.

A very useful activity we indulged in over this episode in linking it to Pygmalion was to have one of my PhD students, Amanda Potter, take a focus group to view the episode and see if they detected the Pygmalion myth anywhere there. Well they mostly didn't but once they were asked to go and read the Ovid narrative, and then go back to the episode, they came up with some rather interesting things which I found very intriguing. One of the things they noted was that as April the robot dies, or shuts down on the swing, she talks about it's getting dark, it's early to be getting dark, and they said actually in the Pygmalion myth the ivory statue wakes up to the light and her lover, again the incest theme starts creeping in here, doesn't it, but I thought that was a lovely kind of image, they saw how the image had been reversed and, of course, one has to say that Pygmalion had never intended to destroy his statue once he brought it to life, although if you're really proud of a work of art, and both Warren's robot and Pygmalion's statue are pretty remarkable pieces of invention, if you bring it to life it is going to grow old and die, so there are all these kinds of issues about the death of the robot, or the closing down of the robot, and the bringing to life of Pygmalion's statue, all kinds of intriguing reflections and refractions here.