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AUGUST STRINDBERG
MISS JULIE

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL MEYER
EDITED BY DAVID THOMAS AND JO TAYLOR

B L O O M S B U R Y

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MICHAEL MEYER

with commentary and notes by

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LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Methuen Drama
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

Bloomsbury is a registered trade mark of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

This edition first published in the United Kingdom in 2006 by Methuen Publishing Ltd
Reissued with a new cover design 2009

This translation of *Miss Julie* first published in 1964 by Secker & Warburg Ltd and
subsequently in 1976 by Eyre Methuen Ltd in a revised edition

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: PB: 978-0-4137-7582-5
EPDF: 978-1-4725-3653-2
EPUB: 978-1-4725-3654-9

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Contents

August Strindberg: 1849–1912	v
Plot	x
Commentary	xx
The Preface	xx
The biographical context	xxvi
Strindberg's Naturalist trilogy	xxxv
The social context	xlvi
The stage setting, stage directions and use of stage space	xlvi
The relationships	lxii
<i>Miss Julie</i> on stage	lxxvi
Further Reading	lxxxiii
Strindberg's Preface to <i>Miss Julie</i>	lxxxvii
MISS JULIE	1
Notes	47
Questions for Further Study	52

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Johan August Strindberg:

1849–1912

- 1849 Johan August Strindberg born in Stockholm on 22 January, fourth son of Carl Oscar Strindberg (a shipping agent) and his wife Ulrika Eleonora (née Norling) who was previously his serving woman.
- 1853 August's father goes bankrupt, although later recovered some financial stability. His financial embarrassment aggravated his already irascible temper.
- 1862 August's mother dies. Thereafter she becomes for him a symbol of ideal purity.
- 1863 August's father marries his young housekeeper, Emilia Peterson. August is mortified by this, which he sees as an act of betrayal.
- 1867 After passing the Student Matriculation Examination, Strindberg spends the summer term at Uppsala University where he decides to study Medicine.
- 1868 Returns to Stockholm and supports himself as a supply teacher and private tutor.
- 1869 Fails his preliminary examination in Medicine. Shortly afterwards engaged as a trainee actor at Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theatre (Dramaten), but he also fails at that. He writes his earliest plays, of which two have survived, *The Freethinker* and *Hermione*.
- 1870 Returns to Uppsala University to study Humanities (Modern Languages and Political Science). His fourth play *In Rome* is performed briefly at Dramaten.
- 1871 His play *The Outlaw* is performed at Dramaten. He receives a small grant from King Karl XV who had enjoyed this latest play. The royal grant permits Strindberg to continue his studies for a further year.
- 1872 Leaves Uppsala without completing his degree course. Settles in Stockholm and makes a second, unsuccessful attempt to become an actor. Completes his first major play, the prose version of *Master Olof*, a historical drama

- set in Sweden at the time of the Reformation. It was not performed for nine years.
- 1872 Works as a journalist in Stockholm on various newspapers
–74 and briefly edits a journal for the insurance trade.
- 1874 Appointed as an assistant librarian at Stockholm's Royal
–82 Library and given the task of cataloguing the Library's collection of Chinese manuscripts.
- 1875 After a brief emotional entanglement with Ina Forstén, the fiancée of an old friend, becomes increasingly friendly with Siri von Essen and her husband Baron Carl Gustaf Wrangel.
- 1876 Makes his first visit to Paris and writes a version of *Master Olof* in verse. Becomes progressively more infatuated with Siri von Essen.
- 1877 Marries Siri after her divorce from Baron Wrangel.
- 1878 Their first daughter dies shortly after birth.
- 1879 Publishes *The Red Room*, a novel satirising writers and artists in contemporary Stockholm. This establishes his literary reputation as a writer of substance, but it also makes him many enemies.
- 1880 Birth of his daughter Karin.
- 1881 First performance of *Master Olof* at Dramaten in the original prose version. Birth of his daughter Greta.
- 1882 After the success of *Master Olof*, Strindberg is inspired to write, within a fortnight, a romantic fairy-tale play called *Lucky Peter's Journey*. This too is a theatrical success. Publishes *The New State*, a swingeing onslaught against contemporary Swedish society and its politics. He is now subjected to virulent attacks in the press.
- 1883 Leaves Sweden (in part because of these attacks) and lives abroad in France, Switzerland, Germany and Denmark until 1889.
- 1884 Publishes *Marriage I*, a collection of short stories about married life. His critique of confirmation and communion as devices to keep the lower classes in their place and his irreverent comments on the wafers and wine distributed at communion lead to him being prosecuted for blasphemy. He returns to Stockholm for the trial. Although he is acquitted, he is left feeling persecuted and diminished by the experience. Birth of his son Hans.

- 1885 Publishes *Marriage II*, a deliberately anti-feminist collection of stories.
- 1886 Publishes the first two volumes of his autobiographical novel *The Son of a Serving Woman*. Also publishes his first attempt at a Naturalist play, *Comrades*.
- 1887 Writes *The Father* in southern Germany. It is performed in Denmark with some success but is not well received in Sweden. Writes a rustic novel called *The People of Hemsö*, about life in the Stockholm archipelago.
- 1888 Writes *Miss Julie* and *Comrades* while living in Denmark. In French, writes *A Madman's Defence*, a highly subjective account of his marriage to Siri. Corresponds with Nietzsche just before the latter becomes insane. *Miss Julie* is widely attacked for immorality when it is published and Strindberg is unable to find a theatre willing to perform it.
- 1889 Partly in response to this, founds his Scandinavian Experimental Theatre in Copenhagen, which is modelled on André Antoine's Théâtre Libre in Paris. *Miss Julie* is banned by the Danish censor the night before it opens and the production has to be transferred to the Copenhagen Students' Union. The production closes after two performances and the theatre goes bankrupt. Writes *The Stronger* and returns to Sweden.
- 1890 Writes *By the Open Sea*, a novel about the psychological collapse of an intellectual.
- 1891 Divorces Siri von Essen.
- 1892 Writes *Playing with Fire* and *The Bond*, his last plays for six years. After living in Stockholm or the archipelago with friends and family, leaves for Berlin. Joins the circle of bohemians and artists who gathered in a tavern called 'Zum schwarzen Ferkel' (The black piglet).
- 1893 Marries the young Austrian journalist Frida Uhl (she was twenty-one). They spend their honeymoon in England, then live in various places in Germany and with her relatives in Austria. *Miss Julie* staged by Antoine.
- 1894 After the birth of his daughter, Kerstin, separates from his second wife and moves to Paris. *Creditors* and *The Father* are staged in Paris. Strindberg is now seen there as a famous literary figure, but he remains impoverished.

- 1894 Writes articles on alchemy while attempting to make gold.
 –96 Suffers from paranoid hallucinations. Studies occultism, alchemy and theosophy. Begins to lose his grip on sanity. He called this period his *Inferno* crisis.
- 1895 Two stays as a voluntary patient at a psychiatric clinic in
 –96 Ystad, Sweden.
- 1896 Leaves Paris and returns to live in Lund, southern Sweden for the next three years.
- 1897 Writes *Inferno* in French, an autobiographical account of his breakdown. Divorces Frida Uhl.
- 1898 Writes *To Damascus*, Parts I and II. This gives a dramatic account, in Expressionist form, of his *Inferno* experience. Writes his mystery play *Advent*.
- 1899 Writes *There are Crimes and Crimes*, and *Erik XIV*, the first of many fine historical plays he is to write over the coming years. Moves to Stockholm.
- 1900 Writes *Gustav Adolf*, *Easter*, *The Bridal Crown*, and *Dance of Death* Parts I and II, a dark comedy that foreshadows Absurdist techniques. Meets the young Norwegian actress Harriet Bosse.
- 1901 Marries Harriet Bosse (she was twenty), but she leaves him before the end of the year. Devotes most of his *Occult Diary* (begun in 1897) to this failed relationship. Writes a fairy-tale play *Swanwhite*, followed by Part III of *To Damascus* and *A Dream Play*, an elegiac Expressionist piece exploring life's recurring patterns of absurdity and anguish. Also writes further historical plays, *Charles XII* and *Queen Christina*.
- 1902 Birth of his daughter Anne-Marie. Writes a historical play *Gustav III*.
- 1904 Divorces Harriet Bosse. Writes *Black Banners*, an outspoken attack on his fellow writers, thinly disguised as a novel.
- 1907 Writes various essays and articles on religion, philosophy
 –12 and politics, including cabalistic works, some of which were collected in his four *Blue Books*.
- 1907 With the young director August Falck, founds his own experimental theatre in Stockholm, Intima Teatern. Writes four atmospheric chamber plays for this theatre: *Storm*, *The Burnt House*, *The Ghost Sonata*, *The Pelican*. None

of them is understood by contemporary audiences, but *The Ghost Sonata* is now viewed as an Expressionist masterpiece. *Miss Julie* is given a triumphant, long-running production at Intima Teatern.

- 1908 Moves into a flat he called 'The Blue Tower' in Drottninggatan 85, Stockholm: this was to be his final home and is now the site of the Strindberg Museum.
- 1908 Writes *Open Letters to Intima Teatern*, a collection of –09 essays on Shakespeare and other theatrical topics.
- 1909 Writes his last play *The Great Highway*, another Expressionist piece. Engaged briefly to Fanny Falkner, an art student (she was nineteen at the time).
- 1910 Intima Teatern closes.
- 1911 Signs a contract with the publisher Albert Bonniers for the publication of his collected works. For the first time in his life achieves financial security.
- 1912 In January, his sixty-third birthday is celebrated with a torchlight procession to his home and he is given a gift of 50,000 crowns. He is already suffering from terminal cancer. On 14 May he dies of cancer of the stomach. Workers and students accompany his funeral cortège to the New Church Cemetery where his grave, among the poor, is marked, in accordance with his last wishes, with a cross of dark oak bearing the inscription 'Ave Crux, Spes Unica' (Hail O Cross, Our Only Hope).¹

¹ Taken from 'Vexilla regis prodeunt' (The Royal Banners forward go), a hymn written by the seventh-century poet and priest, Venantius Fortunatus, which, until the 1960s, was sung at the very end of the Good Friday liturgy in the Catholic Church.

Plot

There are no act divisions. Instead the action of the play follows a continuous progression, which is only interrupted when the main characters leave the stage briefly to hide in an offstage bedroom. The setting remains the same throughout, namely the kitchen of a Swedish manor house belonging to a count. A cooking range, real utensils and pots and pans on the shelves, and a solid pine kitchen table and chairs are intended to give the impression of an actual manor house kitchen. It is Midsummer Eve.

When the action begins, Christine, who is the Count's cook, is preparing some sautéed kidneys for Jean, the Count's valet: it later emerges that he is her lover and fiancé. She is also preparing a foul-smelling abortion potion for Miss Julie's bitch which is pregnant after mating with the gatekeeper's pug. Miss Julie is the Count's daughter. She has decided not to accompany her father on a visit to relatives: instead she has stayed at home to celebrate Midsummer Eve with the servants.

Jean enters carrying the Count's boots which will need to be polished before the Count returns home the next day. He reports, somewhat shamefacedly to Christine, that Miss Julie was leading the servants' dance with the gamekeeper but insisted on dancing with him as soon as she saw him. Jean deflects Christine's irritation at this report by telling her the story of how Miss Julie broke off her engagement a fortnight ago. Jean saw her in the stable yard with her fiancé; she was making him jump over her riding whip until he snatched it from her and broke it across his knee. This bizarre tale restores Christine's good humour. She serves Jean one of his favourite meals, the sautéed kidneys, and brings him a bottle of beer. Instead of the beer, Jean opens a bottle of the Count's burgundy, which he has removed from the cellar and has hidden in the drawer of the kitchen table. As Jean relaxes over his food and wine, his thoughts return to Miss Julie. He begins by criticising her for demeaning herself by dancing wildly with her servants; but then he goes too far and

admits that he finds her a magnificent creature. Christine is understandably put out at this and brings Jean to heel by making him promise to dance with her. At that very moment, Miss Julie enters the kitchen.

Initially, she pretends that her errand is to enquire about the abortion potion Christine has prepared for her bitch. All too soon, she spells out the real reason for coming to the kitchen: she wants another dance with Jean. Initially Jean flirts openly with her when she flips him in the face with her perfumed handkerchief. However, he then changes tactics and decides to play hard to get. He suggests that the other servants will soon start talking if she dances twice in succession with the same partner. Miss Julie bristles at this and brushes aside Jean's excuses; she insists on dancing once more with him.

After Jean and Miss Julie have left the stage, Christine is left alone on stage for a scene of 'pantomime', or acting without words. She tidies the dishes, uses a curling-iron to restore some order to her hair, listens to the distant dance music and then, lost in thought, smooths and folds the perfumed handkerchief that Miss Julie has left behind. Jean enters swiftly, fully aware that Christine is now seriously displeased. His initial tactic is to disparage Miss Julie: he calls her mad for dancing so outrageously. Christine observes that Miss Julie's behaviour is always strange when she has her period coming on. This disparaging remark makes it clear to Jean that he now really has to smooth Christine's ruffled feathers. He puts his arm around her waist and mentions the magic words that she would make a good wife. Just as some domestic harmony is being restored, Miss Julie comes bursting into the kitchen to look for her dancing partner. She covers her obvious embarrassment at finding Christine and Jean at the start of an intimate embrace by ordering him to change out of uniform for this evening of festive celebration. During Jean's brief absence, Miss Julie probes Christine on the nature of her relationship with Jean. Christine defends her status by asserting that she and Jean call themselves engaged. When Miss Julie attempts to belittle this informal arrangement by commenting that she was properly engaged, Christine reminds her sharply that nothing came of her formal engagement.

Jean re-enters dressed in tails; immediately he and Miss Julie engage in a process of flirtatious sparring. While this goes on, Christine falls asleep in her chair. When Miss Julie asks rudely whether Christine snores, Jean replies that she does not; but she talks in her sleep. In saying this deliberately and coolly, Jean reveals that he and Christine regularly sleep together. Apart from making it clear that his relationship with Christine involves physical and sexual commitment, his real purpose is to spell out to Miss Julie that he is a sexually active male who is not interested in playing innocent games of flirtation.

During the pause which follows, Miss Julie acknowledges the fact of Jean's assertive sexuality but quickly recovers her composure. With just a hint of recklessness she continues her seductive game-playing: pulling rank as the mistress of the house, she orders Jean to pour her a drink, to sit with her, to join her in a drink, to drink her health and to kiss her shoe. After Jean has obeyed these various commands which resonate with hidden sexual implications, he warns Miss Julie that they should not go on. Someone might come in and see them, and the servants' tongues are already wagging. Christine is asleep so they are effectively alone.

Somewhat spitefully, Miss Julie responds to this attempt to check her behaviour by trying to wake Christine. Jean intervenes forcefully to stop her: he may be about to betray Christine sexually but he is not prepared to have Miss Julie abuse her. Again, Miss Julie covers any embarrassment by pulling rank: she orders him to come outside with her and to pick some lilacs. Jean repeats the warning he has already given her: if she stoops to become involved with one of her servants, people will simply dismiss her as a fallen woman. His comment encourages Miss Julie to reveal one of her recurrent dreams: namely, that she is on the top of a high pillar and longs to descend to earth but can think of no means of doing so. In contrast, Jean reveals that his dream finds him lying under a tall tree: he wants to climb to the top, view the bright landscape from above and plunder the bird's nest containing golden eggs. These dreams anticipate their respective behaviour patterns during the remainder of the action.

As Jean and Miss Julie are about to leave the kitchen to pick lilacs, Jean pretends to have a speck of dust in his eye. Miss Julie

responds readily to this classic seduction technique. As she makes him sit and lean back against her, she even feels his arm muscles and comments admiringly on his strong biceps. Despite Jean's warning that she is playing with fire, she continues to challenge him sexually by comparing him to the biblical figure Joseph who refused to sleep with the wife of his master Potiphar (Genesis 39: 7–15). Egged on by this taunt, Jean makes a physical pass at Miss Julie; she responds by slapping him in the face.

Completely thrown by this contradictory behaviour, Jean responds initially by commenting that he is tired of the game they are playing and that he must return to his duties and clean the Count's boots. But Miss Julie still refuses to back off: she asks Jean if he has ever been in love. This gives Jean a cue to try the next weapon in his armoury of seduction techniques: a sentimental tale that depicts him, as an adolescent, hopelessly in love with Miss Julie. He tells her of the time he crept into the garden toilet pavilion, only to find himself trapped by the arrival of someone coming to use the toilet. Jean escaped by jumping into the toilet and then landing in the excrement pit below. Afterwards he hurtled through the bushes until he saw the young Miss Julie in the rose garden, dressed in a pink dress and white stockings. He hid under a pile of weeds and thought how unfair life was: one of the robbers crucified with Christ might enter paradise, but a poor child like him was not permitted to enter the park to play with the Count's daughter. He claims that he then tried to commit suicide by dashing into the millstream and, when that failed, by lying in an oat-bin surrounded by supposedly poisonous elder branches. This only succeeded in making him ill.

Miss Julie is completely won over by his story-telling. As she melts, Jean switches his tactic back to brutal frankness. He argues that all men and women are the same despite class differences. He implies that she is not as innocent as she claims and is in fact no different from the last woman he slept with. Miss Julie bristles at this assertion of overt sexuality, to which Jean responds by asking permission to go to bed. Yet again, Miss Julie presses on recklessly, asking Jean to row her out on the lake. Jean refuses and treats her deliberately like a thoughtless child who is moving out of her depth. He begs her to leave and go to bed before it is too late. But he can hear the other servants approaching, singing

a suggestive song about Miss Julie, and he knows that it is already too late for her to escape. There is only one place they can hide: his bedroom. She makes him promise on his knees that he will be her true and loyal 'friend', and he is only too willing to agree. Shortly after they have hurried to Jean's bedroom, the other servants enter for a scene labelled a 'ballet', which is a scene of animated movement and dance but without any dialogue. Carrying barrels of beer and schnapps, the servants engage in a drunken dance that mimics what is happening offstage: namely, Miss Julie and Jean copulating like a pair of animals. As they stumble away, they repeat their rude song about Miss Julie and her loss of innocence. They leave the kitchen in a state of chaotic disorder.

Miss Julie is the first to re-enter the kitchen. In complete disarray, she attempts to restore some semblance of dignity by powdering her face. Jean enters in an agitated state and continues a conversation they had obviously begun in his bedroom. Now that the unthinkable has happened and that he and Miss Julie have had sex together, and everyone knows or can guess, clearly they will have to flee. Resourceful as ever, Jean suggests a fantasy scenario that he has already envisaged in his dreams: they will flee to Switzerland, to the Italian lakes, and start a luxury hotel together. He can envisage Miss Julie as his front-of-house star, sweetly handing over bills to the guests which Jean will have appropriately inflated. He has even calculated in his dreams how long it will take to reach Lake Como by train from Sweden: a mere three days.

Miss Julie at this stage shows little interest in his scheme: like some abused groupie, she merely wants to be reassured that Jean 'loves' her. She needs to be told that she is not just a cheap whore. In contrast, Jean is now increasingly preoccupied with the social taboos he has transgressed. He has nightmarish visions of the Count returning to discover the full horrors of what has happened and he already begins to cringe. He attempts to bolster his confidence by boasting truculently that he might climb into the aristocracy in some other country like Romania. Miss Julie dismisses his social fantasy as trivial: all that matters to her is that he loves her. Jean refuses to be drawn on this topic. He lights a cigar and asks her in a businesslike manner what she thinks of his

project. Briefly she puts aside her demand for emotional reassurance and considers his scheme as a business proposition. As she immediately points out, its key flaw is that it is dependent on the kind of capital neither of them possesses. The alternative, as she herself realises, is for her to stay as Jean's whore in her father's house, which she could not bear.

The next section of dialogue sees Jean taking some delight in diminishing Miss Julie: he obviously did not enjoy the way she brushed aside his project and now intends to hammer home the consequences of being a lackey's whore, while she becomes more and more emotional. He begins by inviting her to share some of the wine he has stolen from her father's cellar. This makes her an accomplice to a sneakthief. He then goes on to tell her that his romantic story about trying to commit suicide for her was just a lie. When he saw her in her pink dress and white stockings, he had the same dirty thoughts as any small boy. With brutal frankness he comments that women always fall for pretty stories. Miss Julie, as Jean intended, is outraged. She orders him to stand when he speaks to her. But this forlorn attempt to pull rank only encourages Jean to diminish her further. To her face he calls her a servant's whore and a lackey's bitch and comments that no girl from his class would behave the way she has. By way of a final insult, he comments that she made his conquest too easy to be exciting.

Again, Jean switches tack. Having humiliated Miss Julie, he claims that he now feels sorry for her. For a while, he reasons with her. She has committed a drunken folly and now wants to convince herself that she loves him: she does not. As he comments that she is too fine for someone like him, he feels his sexual passion re-ignite. Jean is always turned on by a challenge. Miss Julie is wise enough to resist and comments that she detests him as she would a rat, but yet cannot run away from him. At this point in the action, neither of them can think what to do next. Miss Julie's response is to start drinking and to tell Jean the story of her life. Perhaps if Jean knows more about her, he will understand her better. For his part, he warns her not to reveal too much as she must not count on him being a natural ally.

Miss Julie's description of her upbringing goes a long way towards explaining why she is such a confused and neurotic