Strange Bedfellows: Woolf's Feminism and Strindberg's Misogyny

by Faye Kasemset

When Virginia Woolf calls on Mary Carmichael, a fictional woman writer of the new era in *A Room of One's Own*, to laugh at the "peculiarities" of the opposite sex, she offers a couple of models from which to work:

Think how much women have profited by the comments of Juvenal; by the criticism of Strindberg. Think with what humanity and brilliancy men, from the earliest ages, have pointed out to women that dark place at the back of the head! (Room 90)

The jest is at once comic and instructive. Woolf offsets the seriousness of her claim - that women writers are urgently needed to offer an alternative critique of men - with humor, choosing two obviously over-the-top examples from the other sex. She is also demonstrating the appropriate method for such critiques. In earlier chapters, Woolf's narrator (that nebulous "I") is frequently enraged, scribbling angrily over the face of "Professor X", fuming outside the closed door of the Oxbridge library, and envisioning a horrific tale of abuse by men for Shakespeare's sister. By this penultimate chapter, however, she is in full control of her temper. Juvenal's scathing Satire on women and Strindberg's diatribes on the inferiority of women are far crueller than most of the comments by Johnson and others which infuriated her earlier on. Yet here she is, finding levity in this "spot" at the back of two men's heads (for if misogyny is not a dark place in the male psyche, what is?).

Her evocation of August Strindberg is particularly intriguing; she and he championed antithetical philosophies not only on women, but on fiction as well. Yet their viewpoints intersect at odd places, and the sentiments they express share more, no doubt, than either would care to admit. His work is a perfect example of the tradition of literature whose perspective she labels incomplete in *A Room of One's Own*. Strindberg was not a figure from the distant past, like Juvenal, but he was not quite her contemporary, either. He was of an older, already-venerated literary set; his most famous play, *Miss Julie*, was published 40 years before *A Room of One's Own*. As such, his was the generation of naysayers whom it was Woolf's duty to disprove. Strindberg, a naturalist, was obsessed with capturing the complexity of "the human psyche" (Miss Julie xv) - in that respect, his work can be seen as a precursor to Woolf's own writing.

Though not necessarily scholarly, any one of her novels may be read in part as an "elaborate study of the psychology of women by a woman" (Room 78); lacking, however, Strindberg's "qualification" (being a woman herself [see Room 27]), what can Woolf profess to offer that is missing from Strindberg's portrait of women? Is Strindberg's well-publicized hatred of women sufficient to discredit his account of them? That Woolf assumes her readers' familiarity with his work suggests otherwise. In the introduction to her translation of *Miss Julie*, Helen Cooper writes:

It is, ironically enough, through his obsessive revenge against women that Strindberg created the most wonderful parts for women.... Strindberg pulls his women down from pedestals and subjects his female characters to the same ruthless and skeptical observation, which had, of course, long been accepted in the creation of male characters. (Miss Julie x)

Cooper justly celebrates the character of Miss Julie for her complexity. Conflicted and contradictory, she definitely does not seem "wanting in personality and character" (Room 43). The daughter of a feminist, she struggles to live up to the equality ideals of her mother while battling lust and human fallibility (to be equal to man, it would seem, a woman must be perfect - as he is?). In the importance he places on female characters, Strindberg resembles Euripides, a Classical playwright and putative 'misogynist' to whom
Woolf dedicates a footnote (Room 43) - of the characters in Miss Julie (in which he intends to demonstrate the inequality of the sexes), two out of three are women.

Ironically, in their attempts to illustrate opposing viewpoints, Woolf and Strindberg offer eerily similar paradigms: both Shakespeare's sister, Woolf's invention in A Room of One's Own, and Miss Julie commit suicide in the aftermath of a socially forbidden liaison. For Strindberg, the tragedy of Miss Julie is caused by ambitions beyond her abilities:

She is the victim of a false belief...namely that woman - this stunted form of human being compared to man, the lord of creation, the creator of civilization - is equal to man or might become so. Embracing this absurd ambition leads to her downfall. Absurd because a stunted form, governed by the laws of genetics, will always be stunted and can never catch up with the one that is ahead.... Not by means of equal education, not through equal voting rights, not after disarmament, not even if men stopped drinking....

(Miss Julie xvi)

The sentiments he expresses in this preface to his play may seem absurd, even humorous, in the current social climate. As Woolf said of Lady Bessborough, though, "what is amusing now... had to be taken in desperate earnest once" (Room 55). We can deduce from Woolf's frustration that the sentiments Strindberg expresses here had not been quite eradicated in her time. But perhaps we can accept Strindberg's characterization of Miss Julie as plausible (in the body of the play itself) without endorsing his psychological account of it. Miss Julie may not be a literary genius of Shakespearean proportions, but we might see in her the same struggle against convention that destroyed Shakespeare's fictional sister. Julie, like Judith, commits suicide out of fear of the consequences of her sexual licentiousness - repercussions unique to the female position in her society. Her death could have been prevented, we might surmise, not by a switch of gender (as Strindberg suggests), but by a switch in the demands upon her gender. Had Julie been a nobleman's son, she need not have killed herself to avoid the disgrace of sleeping with the kitchen maid. Had Judith been a William, she would have become a Shakespeare.

These parallel fables carry the distinct imprints of their respective authors in their plotlines. Woolf focuses on the career, passion, and ambition of her heroine; men in her tale are presented as obstacles - suppressors of genius. Strindberg's Miss Julie is seen exclusively in her relationship to her footman Jean; though Strindberg claims ambition causes her death, he never shows us Miss Julie attempting any traditionally male occupations. If any attempt to rectify an inequality is responsible for her demise, it is more likely her desire to cross the boundaries of social class than of gender roles. By limiting his portrayal of Miss Julie to the context of her romantic entanglement with Jean, Strindberg supports Woolf's claim that "man is terribly hampered in his knowledge of women," and that women in fiction by men are "seen only in relation to the other sex"; a lover's eyes present "the astonishing extremes of her beauty and horror; her alternations between heavenly goodness and hellish depravity" (Room 83). Right after Jean's "passion awakens again," he calls Miss Julie "a glorious woman, far too good for the likes of [him]"; only moments earlier, he was denouncing her as a "servant's slut" and "footman's whore," likening her to an animal (Miss Julie 25-6). When, in A Room of One's Own, Woolf bemoans the lack of female friendship in literature (such a topic being beyond the scope of a woman's relationship with a man), she cites the jealous dynamic between Cleopatra and Olivia in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra (Room 82); the usage is slightly unfair, given the amicable relationships Shakespeare portrays between Cleopatra and her female attendants. In the case of Miss Julie, the accusation would be just; there is no love lost between his Julie and Christine.

Just as Woolf and Strindberg predict the same tragic fate for a woman struggling against her position of subordination and oppression (though they differ on its cause), both affirm the existence of real differences in the natures of men and women. But what Strindberg believes is inherent weakness, Woolf views as an alternative (and irreplaceable) "creative force... won by centuries of the most drastic discipline" (Room 87). Like Strindberg, Woolf sees danger for a woman who attempts to model herself directly after men: Brontë, according to her, "stumbled and fell" endeavoring to write with "a sentence that was unsuited for a woman's use" (Room 76). Rather than relinquish the right to write (acknowledging herself unworthy, as Strindberg would have her do), Woolf declares that a woman must create her own sentence, "some new vehicle... for the poetry in her" (Room 77). She envisions a woman writer who will write a poetic tragedy through prose,
creating a new genre (and laying claim to the streams of consciousness style which some might credit James Joyce, a male writer, with employing to admirable effect). Although she purports to desire more, not fewer, sexes, Woolf still champions the concept of an "androgynous" mind. In her vision of art, a woman too manly (or a man too womanly, though the rarity of the occurrence precludes severe castigation) cannot succeed, because in too actively seeking the masculine dimension, she will never attain a state of balance, in which the male and female halves of her brain are so in harmony as to be unintrusive (Room 98-102).

According to Woolf, pure masculinity does not suit men, either. She complains about the male writer whose "virility has now become self-conscious"; he "protest[s] against the equality of the other sex by asserting his own superiority." If there was ever a male writer conscious of his gender, it was Strindberg. Does his sentence then fall "plump to the ground - dead"? Is he completely "impeded and inhibited" in artistic ability (Room 101)? Cooper, a woman, would probably disagree. The masculine "I" is omnipresent in Strindberg's work; his Miss Julie is not just an example of feminine weakness - she is a demonstration of female inferiority to man. Strindberg's chronicle of female deficiency is written "in protest... against the equality of the other sex," so why does Miss Julie continue to fascinate? Unlike Mr. A, the imaginary novelist whose tales of passion and exploit fail to titillate in A Room of One's Own, why doesn't Miss Julie seem "somehow dull" (Room 101)?

Perhaps the answer lies in the writer's own passion - in his anger. Like Woolf, Strindberg is angry at the situation of his sex. But while Woolf downplays the creative function of anger in art (leaving unacknowledged the powerful role it plays in drawing the reader into her own essay), Strindberg embraces it. When Strindberg was encouraging his first wife to become a writer (before he had truly begun to hate women), he advised her, "If you get angry your style acquires colour, for anger is the strongest of all spiritual emotions.... Think of an injustice, get angry, bring forth invisible enemies, create adversaries... be 'mad'" (Miss Julie viii). Woolf, in contrast, blames anger for obscuring art; it is responsible, she alleges, for preventing Charlotte Brontë from realizing genius beyond Jane Austen's. The differences in Woolf's and Strindberg's attitudes are stereotypically gendered: she preaches moderation (self-renunciation), he advocates a focused rage (valor). But for all her reservations about anger, Woolf's character in A Room of One's Own is often furious. Behind both her and Strindberg's anger lurks a fear of oppression by the opposite sex. We can see this fear at the beginning of Miss Julie, when Jean describes his mistress "training" her fiancé: "She made him jump over her riding whip like a dog. Twice he jumped and twice she lashed him but the third time he grabbed the whip out of her hand and broke it" (Miss Julie 4). Woolf's self-characterization in A Room of One's Own echoes this image: "so cowardly am I, so afraid of the lash that was once almost laid on my own shoulders" (Room 90).

It is probably this very comparison, between her feminism and his misogyny, that Woolf seeks to avoid when she calls for the artist to possess an androgynous mind, in which "there must be freedom and there must be peace" (Room 104). Woolf and Strindberg may be alike in reaction, but they are opposites in response - for she disowns her less harmonious thoughts with the same vehemence with which he cultivates his. Woolf wants Mary Carmichael to do what Strindberg cannot - learn to laugh from a distance. Her allusion to him in A Room of One's Own is more than a joke; it is a warning.

Works Cited

Footnotes

1. Woolf was only thirteen when Strindberg published "De l'inferiorité de la femme [On the inferiority of woman]" in La Revue Blanche (in which he claims to provide justification for woman's subordinate position through science, laying out the reasons for her physical, intellectual, and moral inferiority to man [Revue 1, 11-12]); she would have been unable to argue with him at the time (at least publicly). She could and did, however, vigorously refute similar claims by Arnold Bennett, her contemporary, on male superiority, through letters to the New Statesman in 1920 (Letters 122-127); she addressed these letters to a favorable reviewer of Bennett's Our Women, citing, in her arguments, Sappho and a number of other illustrious women who then reappear in A Room of One's Own.

2. If Arnold Bennett's works were still read in 40 years, there would be time enough for the live audience of A Room of One's Own to disprove them.

3. If, of course, you read her novels as psychologically mimetic (the case can be made for Mrs. Dalloway and To the Lighthouse, at the very least). On the other hand, Strindberg also demands realistic situations (Miss Julie is based on a true story), while Woolf mocks such rigid realism: "Fiction must stick to facts, and the truer the facts the better the fiction - so we are told" (Room 16).

4. Strindberg's play stands out for its frank discussion of "forbidden" women's topics; his characters openly discuss female lust and menstruation (Miss Julie, according to the cook, is "always a bit strange, when she's got her period" [Miss Julie 8]). Woolf, conversely, has been accused by some critics of being overly fastidious about bodily functions (not just the feminine variety). She herself wrote tastefully, as became a well-bred woman of her time, and was critical of writers who were less delicate in tone (such as James Joyce).

5. At the time, Siri von Essen (his first wife) was married to another man; she had dreams of becoming an actress, impossible with her social standing at the time. Strindberg suggested writing as an alternative outlet for artistic expression (Lagercrantz 56). He also dismissed reservations about her qualifications, declaring, "You say you lack education! God preserve us from writers who retail what they have read in books" (Miss Julie viii). Although we might be tempted to imagine Woolf disagreeing (if women should be given money and a room of their own, surely they need education as well?), she herself was not formally educated, and A Room of One's Own does not explicitly claim education (of the Oxbridge variety) as a prerequisite for art.