

THREE WOMEN AFTER THE SOUL OF WILLIAM JAMES

Steve Fuller

**First Performed at the British Science Festival, 7 Sept 2009
Oak House, University of Surrey, Guildford**

Dramatis Personae

William James (WJ): 28, recently completed medical degree but still unsure of career path, depressed and travelling Europe –
Played by Steve Fuller

Harriet Martineau (HM): about 70, fierce women's advocate and publicist of liberal causes, somewhat partial to spiritualism –
Played by Rachel Armstrong

Clemence Royer (CR): mid-30s, younger French counterpart of Martineau, but with a stronger commitment to materialism;
Darwin's translator – Played by Zoe Walshe

Helena Blavatsky (HB): mid-30s, somewhat mysterious but cosmopolitan Slavic psychic who sees science as the basis for a new religion – Played by Esther Armstrong

SCENE: All the action occurs during a tea party arranged in London by HM on behalf of WJ. The year is 1870. The three women stand on centrestage, while WJ sits to the side.

* * *

WJ: **[Banging loudly on the door]** Miss Martineau, are you home? This is William James! My father recommended that I take tea with you while I'm passing through London....My apologies for not giving you more ample notice.... I have a letter of introduction from Mr Ralph Waldo Emerson.... Please do let me in! If the cross winds don't get the better of me, the polluted air of this Dickensian nightmare of a city will!

HM: Patience, Mr James! I'm coming! **[WJ enters, agitated and disorientated]** Look at the state of you! Imagine what you'll be like at my age! Come now, sit down and make yourself at home, while I make some tea.

WJ: [Just before sitting down] Oh, Miss Martineau, before I forget, here is my letter of introduction from Mr Emerson....

HM: [The tone throughout is possibly ironic] Ah, yes, Emerson! He is a very inspiring speaker and essayist who has done several lecture circuits here. I can't get enough of all that stuff about 'self-reliance' and 'overcoming' this and 'transcending' that. So life-affirming! So empowering! **[As if in confidence]** But you know, he gets it all from the Germans – Kant, Hegel, that lot. Still, I've got to hand it to you Americans: Who else could serve up hundreds of pages of run-on sentences in barbaric German as an hour of pithy pabulum expressed in our much more agreeable common tongue?

WJ: [Po-faced] I hope you do not intend to demean the illustrious Mr Emerson. He's a close personal friend of my father. He stayed with us whenever he was in New York. In fact, we used to call the guest room 'Mr Emerson's room'.

HM: [Clearly sarcastic] Oh how quaint! And did Mrs James have a room to herself while Mr Emerson was in town?

WJ: [Confused] Miss Martineau, whatever are you suggesting?! My father and Mr Emerson share an interest in matters of the spirit!

HM: [Now playing straight but still probing] 'Spirit'? So I may take it then that your father is not a churchgoer, since Mr Emerson renounced the Church as an unreliable witness to matters of the spirit. Needless to say, this caused great consternation amongst the pious who attended his lectures here. They expected greater respect for the Church from someone who once wore a clerical collar and addresses such morally uplifting themes.

WJ: I had not taken you to be a churchgoer yourself.

HM: That's certainly correct. In fact, I followed much the same spiritual path as Mr Emerson, having started as a Unitarian Christian and then passed on to something not so easily housed within four walls.

WJ: So, are you a spiritualist?

HM: Yes, after a fashion – an atheist spiritualist!

WJ: Whatever does that mean?!

HM: Well, I guess it means what 'Unitarian' ought to mean – namely, that there is no clear distinction between the divine and the human. We are all in a position to incorporate the cosmic forces into our being. **[Dramatically extends her arms and then pulls them back]**

WJ: [Slightly condescending to the old woman] Oh, and how exactly are we supposed to do that? Remember, you are speaking someone who holds a medical degree...

HM: [Sharpish] And you remember that I am someone who managed to be cured of heart disease, chronic exhaustion and an ovarian cyst – all through the power of the will!

WJ: Yes, I have read your journals on self-healing, in which you seem to treat medicine as if it were one of Mr Emerson's self-improvement schemes. I keep looking for the science that underlies the success of these purported cures.

HM: I am crystal clear about the relevant science – Mesmerism!

WJ: Mesmerism! You must be kidding! Anton Mesmer was already exposed for his charlatany, nearly a century ago! One of America's founding fathers, Dr Benjamin Franklin, nearly 80 years old by then, was called out to Paris to lead the commission that found Mesmer to be a fraud. Do you even understand how Mesmerism was supposed to work?

HM: Well, yes, as a matter of fact, I undertook a study of it to inform people more generally about its benefits. And once you set Dr Mesmer's Jesuit-inspired metaphysics to one side, he is really talking about a sense of controlled relaxation that enables what he calls 'animal magnetism' – something that permeates the entire universe -- to flow more regularly through our bodies. All illness results from the blockage of this flow, pure and simple. Enough blockages and you die – again plain and simple!

WJ: No, sorry, not so plain and simple: The smart medical money – at least in Germany, where I've recently been – is that disease is more to do with microbes, very small foreign invaders that prey on our bodies and pervert their normal functioning.

HM: Oh, really? And how many of these microscopic creatures does it take to fell a full-bodied adult? And are they just being generated all over the place, or do they come from special locations?

WJ: I don't think you quite catch the spirit of the proposal...

HM:... Oh, I think I do! You are talking about a view of nature – however scientific in appearance – that would have us once again cower before invisible forces beyond our control --

WJ: -- most definitely *not* beyond our control: There are all sorts of precautions and treatments that can be made – and both France and Germany have begun to take measures to protect their populations from the worst effects, especially now that they are again at war with each other. Rumour has it that new drugs, including vaccines, are being applied to the troops of both countries to increase their resistance to strange environments and otherwise insalubrious fighting conditions.

HM: I knew it! This is a scheme for states to accrue power to themselves by making individuals feel defenceless before an imaginary threat! The medical establishment is trying to set itself up as a secular priesthood! Just when I thought we had left the Dark Ages, we are now being plunged right back into them!

WJ: Miss Martineau, you are becoming hysterical!

HM: Oh, and is that your clinical judgement, Mr James – or are you just trying to intimidate a woman who is willing and able to speak her own mind?

WJ: Well, put it this way: I don't feel especially attracted by your animal magnetism...

HM: In any case, Mr James, you claim to be so hard-headed and scientific but I am not at all impressed by Dr Franklin's conclusions concerning Dr Mesmer.

WJ: Well, they were endorsed by the great chemist Lavoisier and the eminent Dr Guillotin. Do you mean to be going against their judgements as well?

HM: Ah, yes: Guillotin! The man who provided the world with the 'guillotine' as an efficiency saving over torture and imprisonment – let alone due process of law! Pardon my cynicism, but a man who knows exactly where to sever the head to cause maximum damage with minimum pain is not necessarily the first person I would turn to for advice on what happens inside the head when it is still attached to the body.

WJ: That's all well and good, Miss Martineau, but have you closely studied Dr Franklin's reasoning?

HM: Why, of course! I make a close study of the evidence – and the inferences drawn from them -- before making up my own mind. Only animals and plants have nature imprinted on them like some workman's boot. We humans are capable of deciding what to believe. Don't you ever forget that, Mr James: We are just as responsible for our beliefs as for our actions!

WJ: I appreciate the sermon, but as for Dr Franklin's scientific failings?

HM: Well, as I recall, Dr Franklin had a glass of water mesmerised and then asked a sufferer of some mental anguish to drink several glasses of water – including the mesmerised one – but without knowing which was which. As Dr Mesmer would predict, the sufferer passed out after drinking from one of the glasses...

WJ: Yes, the *wrong* glass!

HM: Well, it was the *wrong experiment!*

WJ: Whatever could you mean by that?

HM: Dr Franklin, whatever his many talents – and I have been always very impressed by his ability to channel electricity – simply did not have a good grasp of the underlying principles of mesmerism.

WJ: Oh, so now you're going to smuggle in some of that Jesuit metaphysics you were trying to avoid earlier!

HM: Oh, Mr James, you need to learn when to be credulous and when to be sceptical, since you seem to have got them the wrong way round! Mesmerism works by enabling one's animal magnetism to redistribute itself across the body. First the physician establishes what Dr Mesmer called 'rapport' with the patient. This rapport instils in the patient a confidence that his malady will be treated. This in turn causes the patient to focus on his ailment, but in a state of calm that enables him to see it clearly for what it is and thereby overcome it by the most straightforward means possible.

WJ: Sounds like a kinder and gentler approach to exorcism! I thought you were going to keep the Jesuits out of this!

HM: Mr James, how you disappoint me! There is nothing mysterious about what I am talking about. Men of science have written about inducing this process on themselves in sleep to remove barriers that lie in the way of solving problems. Since you seem to be fond of Germans, I refer you to Professor Kékulé at Bonn University. He is now widely credited with putting organic chemistry on a firm scientific basis, a feat he himself credits to a dream in which he imagined a benzene molecule as a snake chasing its own tail, which inspired his discovery of the molecule's structural properties.

WJ: That's all fine and good, but what you fail to appreciate, Miss Martineau, is that Dr Franklin clearly showed that Dr Mesmer's treatments worked only because his patients believed they would work.

HM: On the contrary, Mr James, I am well aware of that. In fact, that was precisely the point of Dr Mesmer's treatments: He wanted the patients to participate in their own recovery. They are not simply pieces of meat waiting to be served up like some main course, having been prepared with various probes and pills! They are agents of their own destiny.

WJ: And what happens if – or rather, when – the patients relapse, if not perish altogether, due to a lack of proper medical treatment? Do you then blame the victim's lack of 'will power'?

HM: **[At first hesitant but then defiant]** Well... yes, such patients failed to follow through on their original commitment to the

treatment. They manifested a weakness of will! But now let me turn the tables on you, Mr James: Did Dr Franklin ever bother to compare Dr Mesmer's success rate with that of more orthodox practitioners of medicine? Did he bother to check whether *even they* performed better when their patients believed that they would be cured by the various probes and pills that filled their bodies?

WJ: No, I suppose you have a point there.

HM: Dr Mesmer was being persecuted simply because he had tapped into what makes medicine of any sort really work – the *will to believe*. **[WJ is impressed by the phrase]** The Church couldn't abide him because they claimed a monopoly over matters of the spirit, and the materialists couldn't abide him because he claimed to be getting a scientific handle on something that wasn't supposed to exist.

WJ: Well, if it's any consolation, Miss Martineau, the smart medical money says that there might be something to Mesmerism, after all -- some distinct psychic state that, under proper experimental conditions, can be induced in patients. However, the exact nature of this state and whatever therapeutic benefits might be derived from being in it remain to be seen...

[CR knocks at the door.]

HM: Yes, I know: *Hypnotism*.... Oh, I hear a knock at the door!

WJ: I didn't know you were inviting guests.

HM: Oh, yes! I thought you might benefit from the lively and informed opinions of three women. **[WJ looks sceptical.] [HM goes off and brings CR in.]**

CR: Harriet, it's bloody cold out there! And frankly, it's not much warmer here!

HM: **[Breezily]** Clemence, you need to take better care of yourself. Have you been eating properly, taking adequate exercise, ... still seeing that republican politician who refuses to leave his wife? Oh, and how is your young bastard, René?

CR: **[Bristling]** Pascal is not a politician but a *public intellectual*...

HM: [Sarcastic] I know that's what you French people say when you mean a politician in exile – Switzerland, I believe, in Pascal's case? Not much of a public there...

CR: No, that's not what I mean!

HM: [Still sarcastic] Oh, that's right: By 'public intellectual' you sometimes mean an academic whose failure to make a mark in his specialist field is a sign that he is destined for greater things...

CR: Really, Harriet, why do you invite me to these teas, if all you do is insult me?

HM: [Still sarcastic but more subtly] Am I insulting you? I am simply holding a mirror to your soul – oh, sorry, I forgot you don't believe in the soul. My mistake! Maybe I am insulting you, after all. My apologies! Being a materialist, you'll appreciate that my remarks have been conditioned by no more than expectations based on past encounters with you, and so they should be treated as mere verbal reflexes.

CR: [Trying to change the subject] So, who have we got here?
[Points at WJ]

HM: [As if having forgotten WJ's presence] Oh, Clemence Royer, meet Mr William James. **[WJ bows]** He's the son of a wealthy something or other from America. James Senior seems to have discovered the world of learning in his old age – not to mention an erotic fixation on Ralph Waldo Emerson -- and has decided to make his son experience it all first hand by travelling around Europe. Isn't that right, Mr James?

WJ: [Not used to this offhand treatment] That's not exactly how I would have put the matter!

CR: Oh, I see... Wealthy American heir touring Europe... Nothing new there. Have you been to anywhere a bit more challenging – Asia, Africa, South America?

WJ: Well, as a matter of fact, yes. I spent a few months assisting Professor Louis Agassiz on a voyage to Brazil where he was collecting specimens for the natural history museum at Harvard.

CR: You don't say! [**Lights up**]

HM: Clemence, I hope you are not planning to take advantage of our guest!

CR: Tell me, Mr James, what was Professor Agassiz's view of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* – surely, you must know about it, as well as Professor's Agassiz's staunch disapproval of anything having to do with evolution.

HM: [**Interrupts before WJ can answer**] Mr James, you may not know this, but Clemence is the French translator of Darwin's great book, and every time he comes out with a new edition, she takes the opportunity to append ever lengthier introductions – to be sure, in the guise of a 'translator's preface' – that provide her a platform for her political views. Isn't that right, Clemence?

CR: [**Irritated**] Whatever. Now, Mr James, you were saying about Professor Agassiz's views of Darwin.

WJ: Well, I must confess I did not have an opportunity to speak with him much about Darwin.

HM: Too busy collecting specimens?

WJ: No, I'm afraid, too busy being ill. I was inspired to join Professor Agassiz's Brazilian expedition upon reading Darwin's own *Beagle* memoirs. But soon after the ship set sail, I began to realize that I wasn't cut out for that sort of thing. In fact, while I was studying medicine, I realized I wasn't cut out for that either.

HM: And weren't you an art student before that?

WJ: Yes, I actually liked painting – and was good at it. But my father didn't think that was a proper career.

HM: Sounds like you're going nowhere fast!

CR: Harriet, don't discourage Mr James. He was about to tell us about Agassiz and Darwin!

WJ: Well, Madame –

HM: -- Mademoiselle – remember the bastard!

WJ: Well, Mademoiselle Royer, I should say that Professor Agassiz and Mr Darwin do share certain research methods. Both really enjoy – and even have a flair for – immersing themselves in nature in all its habitats. Darwin's flair clearly lies in writing about it, but Agassiz – and I speak firsthand from my experience of him as a student at Harvard – had a flair for teaching. He revolutionised our course of study by lecturing us from field sites, where he demonstrated without elaborate laboratory preparation how to approach various plant and animal species in order to derive the maximum insight from them.

HM: But, Mr James, getting your hands dirty was not your cup of tea?

WJ: **[Exasperated]** No, it wasn't. But that doesn't mean I didn't see the value of it! I also thought that Agassiz's much publicised opposition to evolution had radical political consequences, especially in light of the Civil War that occurred in my country shortly after Darwin's book was published. Far from being a supporter of slavery, Professor Agassiz believed that Negroes should be re-patriated to their historic African homelands because – well, basically that's where God built them to live. Agassiz thought that both slave owners and the abolitionists got it badly wrong in their shared view that the Negroes should remain in America at all. Whether free or enslaved, they would always be out of place in our country – at least that was his view.

HM: Clearly, your Professor Agassiz has never heard of free trade – or any other liberal idea! His is a universe where every species has its place and every place its species. It's biological feudalism of the first order! Exactly what I would expect from a creationist – even one who likes getting soil between his fingernails!

CR: Hush up, Harriet! Let Mr James finish.

WJ: Well, I have also read Professor Agassiz's appraisals of Darwin's work, the empirical side of which he rates very highly. However, he questions how Mr Darwin exercises his imagination in making up for absent data. On the one hand, Darwin appears quick to infer that evolution occurs by small gradual changes, even though the geological record suggests the wholesale creations and

extinctions of species, as in the great Ice Age that Professor Agassiz succeeded in demonstrating. On the other hand, Darwin is equally quick to deny any intelligent design – let alone purpose – to nature, simply because species are inevitably dispatched in a way that doesn't happen to conform to his own personal sense of justice.

HM: Yes, these are familiar objections here too.

WJ: I'm afraid Professor Agassiz was of that Calvinist turn of mind that is happy to hold at once the intelligibility and the uncongeniality of divine creation.

HM: I suppose in that way God keeps his distance from humans, in case there was any hint of confusion! **[Laughs – alone]**

WJ: Darwin has always struck me as being of a more tender disposition than Agassiz. He would believe only in a lovable God – or none at all.

CR: You raise an interesting point, Mr James. One with which I continue to struggle in my correspondence with Mr Darwin. I sometimes think he really does believe that we are nothing but hairless apes. He simply refuses to see the positive side of his own great story!

WJ: And what side is that?

CR: That we can take control of evolution – and turn natural selection to our collective advantage!

HM: Oh, Clemence, are you still pushing that line! Remember what happened the last time you tried to slip it past Darwin. Mr James, you may not realize this, but in the first French edition of Darwin's *Origin*, Clemence translated 'natural selection' as *élection naturelle*, which left the distinct impression that nature was engaged in some large-scale breeding experiments.

WJ: Do you mean what Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton, has been calling 'eugenics'?

CR: Precisely, Mr James! A mere typographic convention distinguishes what nature *selects* and what we *elect* to do with our species.

HM: I seem to recall that the Catholic Church took a rather different view of the matter and nearly succeeded in getting Darwin's book banned in France, thanks to your creative approach to translation. As Darwin himself was quick to remind you, he had much less trouble with the Church on this side of the Channel – and we actually understand his theory!

CR: [Fuming] I suspect that Darwin has fallen victim to that fatal British character trait of understatement.

WJ: I'm not so sure about that, Mademoiselle. Ever since Darwin finally published *Origin* – which was itself over twenty years in the making – he has been doing everything he can to distance himself from all the political uses made of his theory.

HM: Clemence, you may recall that I recounted how socially awkward Charles Darwin was in my presence, whenever I paid a visit to him and his brother Erasmus at the family home. My, that must have been 30-40 years ago now! Even then all he could talk about at any great length was finches or barnacles! Not what I would call very engaging company.

CR: Well, Harriet, I'm afraid I know Darwin's side of the story, and he simply found you intimidating and not very pleasing to the eye. He wasn't shy. He was merely averting his gaze! In fact, when I asked Darwin if he had made your acquaintance, he responded by recalling his brother's advice not to think of you as a woman. Apparently it worked wonders – and not only with him!

HM: Well, I'm sure that it's been more Darwin's loss than mine. In fact, I hear that he refuses to converse with his wife on any controversial issues – especially spiritual ones – for fear of upsetting her. He may write up a storm about evolution but he seems to have a hard time recognizing half the population as fit members of his own species.

WJ: Ladies! I fear that this discourse is descending into unseemly gossip and tittle-tattle!

HM: Mr James, perhaps you don't realize, but in this country all liberal-minded, free-thinking people want more information to flood into the public domain – including information about sexual conduct and reproduction. That will enable all people – and I mean every sexually active male and female – to decide their own fate in a more considered and justified fashion. John Stuart Mill has been campaigning for this principle, both in and out of Parliament, for many years now. And he has not been helped at all by Mr Darwin's conspicuous public silences and private misgivings.

WJ: It is a distressing feature of Darwin's character, I must admit. Even Herbert Spencer, who has always been much more openly supportive of evolutionary ideas than Mill, has joined Mill on this campaign – taking advantage of the following he has gathered from subscriptions to his work in the United States.

HM: [Returning to CR] What you fail to see, Clemence, is that in the end Darwin is a limited thinker. He really does not see science as the great vehicle of Enlightenment, in the way you or I do, or – I suppose – Mr James does. Darwin appears to believe that most people would not be able to handle knowledge of contraception sensibly. I suppose he imagines that they would curtail their numbers, which in turn would deplete agriculture and industry of most of their labour force, all the while opening up opportunities for wanton lust and widespread moral corruption. The more I think about it, the more I can see why the Catholics – at least outside of France – haven't had such a problem with him.

WJ: Nevertheless, Miss Martineau, don't you believe that there is something to what Darwin has to say on this score?

HM: No, not really. The more information that is made available to people, the greater the opportunity for them to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. This is why in my younger years, while Mr Darwin was staring at finches and barnacles, I was campaigning for reform of the Poor Laws. You were probably not even born, Mr James, when our Great Reform bills were passed in the 1830s. They ended this dreadful perversion of religious sentiment that had led people for nearly a hundred years to think that the rich owed the poor a livelihood because the poor would otherwise never be able to do so for themselves. Mr Mill, myself and many others – of both sexes, I am happy to say – argued vigorously, and successfully, against this demeaning idea. Instead we called for an

end to this dependency culture and its replacement with the provision of incentives for the creation of new schools and new jobs – all in the name of expanding people's freedom of choice.

WJ: But Miss Martineau, are you not concerned that people might not rise to the occasion – indeed, that the wisdom of their choices might be limited by their biological natures? When Professor Agassiz used to lecture about the human races, he would point to the enormous amount of unemployment, destitution and even homelessness among the freed Negroes of our northern states as evidence that a 'one size fits all' approach to liberty does not work for humanity.

HM: Of course, there will be setbacks and failures, some of them no doubt fatal. But it makes all the difference in the world that they have been the result of decisions taken from a reasonable range of options – in this case, decisions concerning when, and if, one starts a family. Anything less would be to deny one's fundamental humanity. In a sense, Mr James, being human is not a matter of winning or losing: It's how you play the game.

CR: I'm sorry, Harriet, we can do much better than simply play games! What is science for, after all! Mr James is raising a reasonable concern here, but it's one that only a politics clearly grounded in science can address properly. Faced only with your fantasy of promiscuous information flows, it's hardly surprising that Mr Darwin or Mr James might have some misgivings. Indeed, individuals are bound to do strange things with what they learn. However, your fixation on individuals is the last vestige of the old theological world-view that we need to give up now. Yes, Harriet, despite your periodic sneers at men of the cloth, you still harbour hopes of securing personal salvation for all of humanity. But I'm afraid Darwin has taught us that we need to put an end to that way of thinking once and for all. Instead what we need to care for are *populations* – specifically, their long-term survival.

WJ: But isn't a population simply a group of individuals in a particular place?

CR: Yes, but the emphasis is placed on 'group' rather than 'individuals'. To maintain, and even strengthen, the group, one may need to sacrifice some of the individuals, however heartless or counter-intuitive that may seem. This is where eugenics comes

in. You will notice that Francis Galton is making his plea for this nascent science to people with influence over government policy, not to ordinary workers and citizens. While I agree with Darwin that no particular individual – nor even a bunch of individuals taken separately – can match the wisdom of natural selection, a concerted political initiative projecting several generations into the future can do so.

WJ: But Mademoiselle, exactly what would be entailed by your proposal?

CR: Well, Mr Galton has already shown some of the way by proposing tax relief for people from accomplished families to mate with each other. But at the other end of the spectrum of humanity, I would also go farther than simply make knowledge of contraception available to the poor. I would mandate the use of contraception on people with proven hereditary deficiencies – and moreover, I would commission research designed to make identification of such cases easier and more reliable. I have some ideas along these lines, which I hope to share with you, if I get a chance.

HM: Clemence, this is fanciful, even by the standards of your hyperactive imagination! No wonder Mr Darwin has refused to have you get anywhere near the French translation of *The Descent of Man!*

CR: Harriet, I wonder just how deep is your defence of women's equality. In this very book -- that, as you rightly say, Mr Darwin will not allow me to translate -- he depicts a sex-based division of labour as if it were a law of nature. He writes about the beauty and docility of the female of the species as constituting a secondary selection environment for males to compete against one another in the struggle for survival. Do you honestly think that this state of affairs, so entrenched in the animal kingdom, is likely to remedy itself simply by providing more information to people and giving them more choices? Or do you not think that this discrimination will simply become more sophisticated, and in that sense, more deeply entrenched?

HM: There's a lot of Gallic sound and fury in what you say, but *où est la boeuf?*

CR: Don't you see? – Women need to give up their dedication to beauty and docility and actively compete against men in the workplace.

WJ: But you're speaking as if there must be a tradeoff between being beautiful and being productive.

CR: I'm afraid there is. Otherwise, as Darwin says, women are simply left to be part of the selection environment.

HM: Oh, Clemence, even Mr Darwin thinks more highly of women than that. After all, he still places women in charge of reproduction, which is why he is so reluctant to have them curtail their activities with knowledge of contraception.

CR: But, Harriet, being a political economist, has it not crossed your mind that the difference between *production* and *reproduction* is merely typographical?

HM: Oh no, not another one of your quixotic spelling lessons!

CR: Hear me out! You have always written so eloquently about the capacity of women to think as well as men and, in most cases, to do the work of men. Well, don't you think that the overall lot of humanity would be markedly increased by regularly allowing women to compete with men in all walks of life? At the very least, it would raise the standard of performance all round.

WJ: [**Alarmed by what he's been hearing**] But who would mind the children?!

CR: The state, of course! Especially now that we've got a republican regime installed in France. Rather than go through the haphazard process of mating and the uncertainties of homelife, we can let the state set the conditions on who is fit to mate with whom, in what amounts and in what environments.

HM: Clemence, it sounds to me like you want to turn France into a factory for manufacturing French people.

CR: *Exactement!* It is only once the state is handed over social roles traditionally assigned to the sexes that men and women will be equally free! Moreover, the children produced under such an

arrangement will attach their affections to the society that as a whole is responsible for raising them rather than the particular set of parents who by chance happen to have borne them.

WJ: But don't you believe that there is an instinctive attachment between mother and child?

CR: But instincts were made to be broken -- *n'est-ce pas*? At least I always thought that was the whole point of being human.

HM: Clemence does have a point there – though I don't mean to be signalling agreement. Clemence, you appear to take very literally the idea that our inherited traits are a kind of 'human capital', if you will, whose employment can be controlled just as much as ordinary forms of material capital.

CR: My dear Harriet, our biological inheritance is *nothing but* a form of material capital! And the point of the state is to ensure that the nation's available capital is used as efficiently as possible to benefit as many as possible. Moreover, this is not something that I – or even the great Charles Darwin – invented. That's exactly how the Catholic Church has justified its mystifications surrounding sex, and even how various caste-based societies around the world have explicitly regulated people's mating patterns from time immemorial. My own proposal differs from these religiously inspired regimes in that mine would actually allow people to lead useful lives.

HM: [Interrupts] Don't you mean *force* people to lead useful lives?

CR: [Continues] Surely, Harriet, you would be the last to deny that the Catholics and the Hindus are equally guilty of turning relative indolence into a principle of social organisation.

HM: Again, Clemence, you may have a point but I do insist on the individual's right to decide for him- or herself.

CR: What Mr James so quaintly calls the 'instinctive attachment' between mother and child has rarely played any discernible role in the reproduction of the species – assuming that such a bond truly exists. **[WJ looks aghast]** On the contrary, it's always been a matter of political economy, rightly or wrongly gauged. Harriet, if you weren't still wedded to the theological idea that individuals

need to make choices for themselves --as if they were standing before God – you would concede my point without reservation....

[HB knocks loudly at the door]

HM: Hold that thought, Clemence. I think our final guest may have something to say on these matters. **[Goes to the door and introduces HB]** Madame Blavatsky, please do come in.

HB: There is quite a chill in the air! **[Peering into room]** Oh, you did not tell me that others would be present.

HM: Well, yes, I only learned that they would be passing through on short notice.

HB: [Portentously] Just because the notice was short doesn't mean that the purpose had not been long planned – though perhaps not by you!

HM: [Matter-of-factly] Well, yes, whatever. Let me introduce Madame Helena Blavatsky to Mademoiselle Clemence Royer, a French publicist who has acquired a certain notoriety in her native land as the translator of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. **[HB extends her hand grandly, which CR shakes rather stiffly]** Over here is Mr William James, who is touring Europe after having completed his medical studies in the United States. **[HB shakes WJ's hand, though fixates a bit long on WJ, much to his consternation.]**

HB: I suppose I should offer my apologies as well, since I had not expected to arrive in London so soon.

WJ: Oh, and where have you been, Madame Blavatsky?

HB: In Cairo. My husband was scheduled to perform at the opera there but he died en route.

WJ: My condolences! Of what exactly did he die? **[HB suddenly looks uneasy]**

HM: [Smooths over the situation] Mr James, I'm sure your keen medical curiosity need not be sated so quickly! Would you like some tea, Madame Blavatsky?

HB: Yes, that would be lovely.

CR: So what exactly is it that you do, Madame Blavatsky?

HB: I am a seeker after the hidden truths of the universe.

CR: **[Dismissively]** Aren't we all... But specifically, Madame Blavatsky, what is it that you do to earn a living? Do you have an inheritance from your family or, for that matter, your late husband?

HB: Actually I have been twice married. The first time the marriage was arranged, but I escaped from my betrothed on horseback. **[With increasing drama]** My father chased after me across the Russian steppes but I managed to outwit him, having persuaded a captain to transport me from Odessa to Istanbul. I have not returned to Russia since then. So, Mademoiselle, in answer to your question, I make my own way in life. I do not depend on men. My only source of sustenance is the energy I channel from the cosmos.

CR: **[Sceptically]** And how exactly do you channel this energy?

HM: **[Mischievously]** She farts!

WJ: **[Confused]** She what?!

HM: You heard me, Mr James. Madame Blavatsky is an accomplished farter. People have been paying to hear and smell her farts all across Europe – and soon she will be travelling to New York to perform similar feats of intelligently designed indigestion!

[HB displays no emotion but closes her eyes and concentrates, perhaps preparing for a fart?] Oh no, Madame Blavatsky, if you're going to start channelling in my parlor, I shall have to open the windows – and it's already cold in here!

HB: Don't worry, Miss Martineau, the conditions are not ripe for a transmission. If and when the conditions are ripe, you will hear me issue a shudder before the transmission occurs.

HM: Well, let's hope that doesn't happen. In any case, I hope you didn't bring any of those bloody cigars. You are really the original smoke and mirrors show!

WJ: [Curious] Well, if you don't mind, Madame Blavatsky, how exactly are you farts supposed to channel what you take to be the energy of the cosmos?

HB: This energy – the life force of the universe -- flows naturally throughout all of space but once it becomes concentrated in matter, it can lead to blockages that create all sorts of turbulence and disturbances. Some like my farts are experienced by witnesses only second-hand, but others such as the spirits I sometimes conjure up in séances are experienced first-hand by all present, including the sceptics.

WJ: With all due respect, Madame Blavatsky, I can see why Miss Martineau invited you here. You are part of her stealth campaign to persuade me of the merits of mesmerism and affiliated spiritualist doctrines!

HM: [Reassuring] I can assure you, Mr James, that is not the case at all. Perhaps Madame Blavatsky anticipated the momentousness of her visit here, but I did not.

HB: Mr James, surely, you are familiar with the rapid pace with which we are gaining an understanding of the invisible forces of nature that seem to defy our commonsense perception of the world and even befuddled the great Isaac Newton?

WJ: If you mean what is increasingly called 'electromagnetism', yes. What of it?

HB: Then you know that first it was discovered that a magnet could induce magnetism in an adjacent piece of iron, then that a static electric charge could induce another such charge in a neighbouring body. Finally Michael Faraday came along and did the same thing for electric currents, resulting in the electrical generators that have sprouted up in lighthouses along the English coastline. Most recently, Professor Clerk Maxwell in Cambridge claims to infer from this chain of insights that electricity and magnetism, and possibly even light, are the same thing expressed in different forms. Science is quickly coming to a precise knowledge of the media of spiritual transmission – what Maxwell himself calls the 'aether'.

HM: [Interrupts] All true, Madame Blavatsky. But you seem to have left out that Maxwell normally makes his claims with the aid of crystal clear mathematical formulae, not mere sealing wax and string, as Faraday had done in his experimental demonstrations. **([Turning in confidence to WJ]** Of course, this made for great fun at Christmastime when Faraday did his public lectures the Royal Institution!) **[Back to HB]** But in any case, Maxwell certainly does not fart his way through physics experiments to draw his conclusions.

WJ: Actually, Miss Martineau, Clerk Maxwell rarely does experiments himself; he imagines what general principles might underlie them, were they done under ideal conditions –and that intellectual feat might involve producing something like the mechanical model of the ‘aether’ that Madame Blavatsky referred to.

HB: You see, Miss Martineau, even physicists have got into the business of channelling the spiritual world.

CR: [Interrupts] Hold on, Madame Blavatsky! I’ve been listening patiently to your talk about channelling, and from everything that I have read about you, I gather that all you have succeeded in channelling is other people’s work. Many claims of plagiarism have been made against your writings, some backed by lawsuits.

HB: Yes, of course, there are naysayers who strike out of fear of what they fail to understand. But I would have thought I could count on women of such independence of mind and critical judgement as yourselves to recognize an outmoded legality when they see one. I’m afraid that plagiarism – no less than its mirror image, possession – is based on faulty metaphysical assumptions. We do not own what we say, and hence it cannot be stolen. What we say has usually been said many times before. The appearance of novelty and originality is merely a function of our forgetfulness. **[Returning to WJ]** You mentioned mesmerism earlier, Mr James, and that is certainly one proven way of enabling people to unblock their conscious minds so that they can channel those forgotten memories more effectively. Do you have a taste for metaphysics, Mr James?

CR: Well, I can smell it a mile away, and it’s always foul! **[HB looks cross]** No offence, Madame Blavatsky...

WJ: I suppose if the metaphysics in question is life-enhancing, I can certainly abide it.

HB: Well, the secret of the cosmos goes back to astrology, a science attached to most of the world-religions, however much they have differed over dogma. Everything derives from the stars and is composed of stellar energy channelled through the aether. Some forms of matter, especially organisms – and especially certain humans -- function particularly well as transmitters and receivers. I wouldn't be surprised if Faraday and Maxwell secretly dabbled in astrology, much as Newton had done. They all seem to have had a rather 'spiritualised' view of Christianity. There is a euphemism in English for this state of mind – ah yes, 'Unitarian'!

HM: Be careful, Madame Blavatsky! My brother was a Unitarian minister and, to be sure, that is the basis of my own spiritual leanings. But I don't want to be implicated in any astrological hocus-pocus.

HB: Suit yourself, but can't you see that we have already begun to develop technologies based on our innate stellar powers? Consider the case of telegraphy, which is based on telepathy.

CR: [Interrupts] Madame Blavatsky, I'm afraid that you've got the causal arrow the wrong way round. Telegraphy is not modelled on telepathy. Telepathists like yourselves rely on telegraphy as an imaginative anchor to persuade non-believers that there might be something to your powers. The problem is that we can actually follow the wires and cables that enable telegraphic communication to occur. Your powers would seem to be wireless.

HB: And who says there won't be wireless communication someday, once we tap into the relevant forgotten memories?
[Everyone in the room laughs at the idea's absurdity, except HB]

HM: [Trying to save HB apparent embarrassment] Well, maybe it's best to change the subject. Clemence, before Madame Blavatsky arrived, you were talking about some ideas you had for identifying hereditary deficiencies that might improve the overall condition of humanity.

CR: Yes, it involves opening up people's skulls and peering into their brains.

HM: That sounds a bit drastic. Don't they need to be dead first?

CR: Yes, of course! In fact, I have helped to start clubs up and down France devoted to what I call 'The Society for Mutual Autopsy'. It basically involves a voluntary agreement amongst mutual acquaintances to open up each other's skulls once they have died, and to record meticulously the various cerebral fissures.

HM: Clemence, that sounds perfectly hideous! Have you become some sort of grave snatcher in your middle age?

CR: No, Harriet. We now know from examining the brains of those who die in hospital what sorts of ailments are associated with various creases on the brain's surface. The Society for Mutual Autopsy aims to make the divulging of the information a civic obligation that will be duly forwarded to a national registry. **[WJ looks incredulous]** Don't you see, Mr James, the people who are best positioned to make judgements about the significance of particular cerebral fissures are those who knew the deceased intimately. They would be able to explain any idiosyncratic brain patterns as the imprints of unique life experiences.

HB: [Not impressed] And what exactly would be the point of this exercise – especially given your lack of sympathy for spiritualism. Why all this fuss over the brain?

CR: Madame Blavatsky, you're being deliberately obtuse here. The Society for Mutual Autopsy would unify the most private and the most public forms of social interaction under a scientific rubric – all for the greater glory of France!

HB: So, there is some French spirit that you're trying to promote by all this cerebral probing?

CR: Why, yes! Is there something wrong?

HB: Well, I am puzzled why given your avowed materialism you would be so eager to organize people in such an artificial manner to promote something that, by your lights, shouldn't exist all – namely, the 'French spirit'.

CR: But this is just a manner of speaking for the Darwinian struggle for survival. You missed my earlier discourse about the need for nations to remain competitive by adopting efficient production and reproduction strategies.

HB: That seems to be a lot of trouble to put people through for a conception of life that ultimately results in extinction.

HM: Madame Blavatsky, are you channelling Charles Darwin now?!

HB: Well, at least Darwin understands the full extent of what he is rejecting, when he rejects the spiritual world. I am not so sure, Mademoiselle, whether you understand the full extent of what you're accepting, when you accept materialism.

WJ: Madame Blavatsky, I am at a loss to know where you are taking us with this interrogation.

HB: Well, Mr James, since you have received your training in medicine only in the recent past, you may not realize that only a few years ago there was no consensus whatsoever concerning the brain as the principal organ of our mental life. On the one hand, the clerics refused to admit that the mind could be pinned down to any part of the body. After all, that would open the door to external manipulation. But even worse, at least from their standpoint, it suggested that some other group of people, including mediums such as myself, might have more direct access to the soul than they do. On the other hand, the anti-clerics were typically materialists who believed that 'mind' is simply another name for the organization of matter, which is present to varying degrees throughout nature, but ultimately nothing special – or at least nothing that might repay concerted study.

HM: Madame Blavatsky, you exaggerate the polarities here!

HB: Perhaps. But the fact remains that the people who were most prescient in recognizing the human brain -- the primary organ in nature for communicating with the entire cosmos -- were avowed spiritualists. Not only Franz Mesmer, but especially his own inspiration, the great Swedish mining engineer, Emanuel Swedenborg, as well as Mesmer's contemporary, Franz Joseph

Gall, the originator of the cranioscope used in phrenology. And in our own time, the person who follows most closely in their footsteps – and he is someone I recommend highly – is the evolutionist Alfred Russell Wallace.

WJ: But Madame Blavatsky, these are all scientific misfits that you've named – even Wallace. To be sure, these people have their followers but when Ralph Waldo Emerson said that ours would be the century of Swedenborg, he was referring exclusively to Swedenborg's mystical readings of the Bible and his dream interpretation – not his theory of the brain, which I gather was based on a critical reading of medical accounts rather than any original research.

HB: Well, Mr James, sometimes reviewing all the evidence with a fresh pair of eyes is all that it takes to bring about a scientific revolution. Indeed, sometimes less is more when it comes to research, especially if one is in a frame of mind receptive to hearing voices from the past.

[Loud knock at the door]

HM: I won't be a moment. **[Goes off stage and speaks as if responding to a hidden interlocutor]** Yes, officer?.... Madame Helena Blavatsky?..... Why are you asking after her?..... **[MB begins to close her eyes and concentrate, as if preparing to fart]** She failed to pay her passage from Cairo to London?.... You have a warrant for her arrest?.... You say you smelled something sinister coming from this house.?....

HB: Arrrgghh! **[Farts noisily – Everyone rushes offstage holding their noses]**

THE END