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Demography in *The Portrait of a Lady*

*None of my deaths is a statistic.* This motto evokes James’s authorial pride in the sophistication of his fiction, and also an assertion of human freedom and social privilege made by his novels and tales in the face of the social sciences that emerged during his lifetime.

*The Portrait of a Lady* is centrally concerned with the tension between types and classifications on the one hand and the singularity and aspirations of the individual on the other. In terms of the social breadth of its canvas – the range of contemporary lives and deaths that it shows – this novel is arguably James’s most ambitious and densely realised work. It tries out a series of portraits of its heroine against character types defined by gender, nationality, and class. This testing process is commonly understood by critics in terms of formal properties of narrative closure; the novel’s exploration of free will, responsibility, and the social construction of identity; and topical debates around the American leisure class, gender roles, and transatlantic marriages. An important contributory factor to these topical debates was the census, which introduced into public discourse new kinds of thinking about women, social structure, and nation. The census exemplified the power of statistical methods for government and social science, a power that had been growing and becoming more publicly visible throughout the century. In direct contrast to the literary project of his avowed master, Balzac, James’s fiction responds to this rise of statistical thinking with an emphatic distaste for numbers and with disapproval of deterministic or systematic literary treatment of the individual in modern society. James never becomes a committed naturalist – that is, a novelist-as-social-scientist.
His heroine, the prototypical American woman, Isabel Archer, believes that she is special, and the novel’s notoriously open ending, empowered by the climactic pathos of Ralph’s deathbed scene, allows her character to retain a glow of indeterminacy. With its pessimism and extended play on actual and metaphorical death, the novel triumphantly demonstrates its own capacity, as a form of public discourse, to make and keep its modern, representative heroine special through her darkest hours. To attempt a demographic-style survey of the characters in *The Portrait of a Lady*, and of mortality in James’s fictional population as a whole, is therefore to read against the grain.

**Calculation, the crowd, and the sublime**

The census provides a statistical basis for topical debates around women, marriage, education, and work in which *The Portrait of a Lady* intervenes. The 1851 and 1861 figures revealed an excess of ‘superfluous’ unmarried women and inspired discourses of emigration and imperialism, for example in terms of British governesses exported to the colonies.\(^1\) The census is an exemplary Victorian achievement, built on eighteenth-century actuarial work for life assurance companies, the development of a massive legal and administrative apparatus to support the 1836 Registration Act (which changed requirements for recording of demographic data), and the gradual professionalisation of statistics during the nineteenth century.\(^2\)

The census provides a contemporary measure against which to compare James’s fictional population, a measure to which historical analysis has added retrospective understanding of demographic trends. Maureen Montgomery’s analysis of transatlantic marriages, for example, takes James’s fiction as a primary source alongside autobiographies and newspaper articles and then contrasts these with numeric data derived from sources such as *Burke’s Peerage*, probate records, and surveys of estate acreage and rental income – that is, data collected at the time but whose historical significance has become apparent only retrospectively.\(^3\) The result is an historical narrative, illuminating for reading James’s fiction, about the economic, social, and personal reasons behind the transatlantic marriage phenomenon.

James’s fiction itself scrupulously avoids overtly numeric discourse. Instead, it evokes *value, quantity, and incalculability* as suggestive