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“Brighton possesses all the requisites ... for either amusement or dissipation”: Frivolity in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*

By Heather Weis

Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* describes the city of Brighton cursorily, but it is a subject well worth investigating, as it the setting for an important plot point and prospects of a trip to the city create such a furor among the inhabitants of the Bennet house. When the militia that is stationed at Meryton removes to Brighton, Mrs. Bennet, Lydia, and Kitty are all anxious to follow it. Elizabeth returns from her visit to the Collins’s to find that a trip to Brighton has been a highly debated point of contention at Longbourn while she was away. Influenced by her recently-learned knowledge of Wickham’s character, Elizabeth is pleased when she sees that her father is not going to agree to Mrs. Bennet’s scheme. However, Lydia eventually satisfies her desire to attend the regiment to Brighton when Mrs. Forster invites Lydia to accompany her. Elizabeth appeals to her father, reasoning that “the temptations [for imprudent behavior] must be greater [at Brighton] than at home” (269), especially considering Lydia’s propensity for flirtation. For Lydia, Brighton is the ultimate site of amusement: she believes the city will be overrun with officers, all of whom will be dazzled by her. It is during her trip to Brighton that Lydia elopes with Wickham.

In Lydia’s imagination, a visit to Brighton comprised every possibility of earthly happiness. She saw with the creative eye of fancy, the streets of that gay bathing place covered with officers. She saw herself the object of attention, to tens and to scores of them at present unknown. (Austen 271)

According to *A Companion to the Watering and Bathing Places of England*, “Brighton possesses all the requisites, like other watering places, for either amusement or dissipation” (22). Before the Prince of Wales bestowed his presence upon the city, it was a fishing village of little consequence. When the Prince Regent chose the village as his favored summer destination, it became “one of the most important watering places in the kingdom” (18), despite its otherwise paucity of attraction and abysmal bathing prospects. The Prince’s visits brought other members of the ton to the area, making it quite the fashionable destination. In his poem, George Saville Carey describes the ton, who “carouse/Together in a tiny house” doing “what in town they would despise” (71). The atmosphere conveyed here is one of unmitigated revelry: a continuous party. The city had a few other forms of amusement: two libraries that were constantly frequented and two Assembly rooms, one located at the Castle Tavern and the other in Ship-Street (*Companion* 22). It also had a theatre that was “better than many other provincial playhouses” (23).

Brighton was also a resort destination, although its sea-bathing prospects were not favorable. The northwest winds often spurred waves that were too dangerous for bathing, but there were several cold and hot baths, a sweating bath, and a shower bath (24). Salt water was believed to have highly medicinal qualities and the *Companion* reports: “With respect to the impregnation of the water with saline particles, Brighton is unrivalled” (24). Interestingly, Brighton is situated on a route to France, being only 90 miles from Dieppe and was often frequented by France-bound London travelers (20).

“Yes,” thought Elizabeth, “[a trip to Brighton] would be a delightful scheme, indeed, and completely do for us at once. Good Heaven! Brighton, and a whole campful of soldiers, to us, who have been overset already by one poor regiment of militia, and the monthly balls of Meryton.” (Austen 259)

The novel characterizes Brighton mainly in terms of the city’s connection to the regiment. Lydia’s central desire to go to Brighton is to follow the regiment there and Elizabeth’s major objection to Lydia’s visit is the presence of the regiment. The historical texts indicate that Brighton is not only associated with the military, but also with frivolity and dissipation. It is a resort city frequented by the Prince and his associates. With this view of Brighton, Lydia’s attraction to the city can be expanded from her single-minded devotion to flirtation; undoubtedly, she would also have been drawn to Brighton as the “seat of fashion” (Carey 71). The lure of residing in the same city as prominent social figures, those who set the trends of fashion, would have been irresistible to Lydia. A trip to Brighton would have very much resembled a trip to London, but with more emphasis on frivolous enjoyment than on the propriety of London. The revelry that characterizes Brighton also gives credence to Elizabeth’s fears. While it is entirely plausible that Elizabeth’s apprehension for Lydia’s well-being at Brighton is connected solely to the presence of the militia there, it is much more understandable in view of the frivolity and dissipation that characterized the city. Brighton’s permissive atmosphere would have greatly exacerbated Lydia’s propensity for ill-manners and self-indulgence. The historical texts also illuminate an underlying vindication for Mrs. Bennet’s desire to go to Brighton. The city’s medicinal waters could have acted as a cure for her ever-sailing nerves. The regiment’s removal to Brighton also alludes to the unmentioned military engagements that occur in the time the novel is set. This time period is flanked by the French Revolution and it is telling that Austen sends the regiment to Brighton, a city which has direct access to France and could very well bear the brunt of a French attack—an attack that would have left Lydia in a perilous situation considering the frivolous, rather than soldierly, pursuits that Brighton offered.


