Pride and judgement: the Annals of Oncology prizes

“For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?”

Recently I have been getting in touch with my feminine side. We don’t need to go into the details of that now. For our current purposes it will suffice to say that I have, among other things, been revisiting the novels of Jane Austen. Jane Austen died at the age of 41, having written only six novels, of which only four had then been published, and those essentially anonymously. She was unmarried and had travelled little. Today, nearly 200 years after her death, all her novels, and many other of her writings, remain in print. Films, television dramas and popular biographies appear regularly. Academic study of Jane Austen has become such an industry that the British author David Lodge, former Professor of English at the University of Birmingham, writes about a character, Morris Zapp, a Professor of English, in his novel Changing Places, who imagines that his project to complete the ultimate, exhaustive study of Austen would have the effect of “rendering scores of his colleagues redundant: periodicals would fall silent, famous English Departments be left deserted like ghost towns . . .”

An aside: those of you now expecting me to leap boldly into the Jane Austen’s illness debate, Addison’s versus Hodgkin’s, should apply elsewhere [1]. We are more interested in her life and what she had to say. So what is Jane Austen saying that we still want to hear? To borrow a little from Mr Lodge again, it is surprising how many people think that Jane Austen’s novels are about finding Mr Right.

Consider my opening quotation from Pride and Prejudice. Late in the book, Mr Bennett confronts his daughter Elizabeth with the, to him, laughable suggestion that she will soon receive a proposal of marriage from the wealthy, influential and, let’s face it, dashing, Mr Darcy, Mr Right writ large. The joke, of course, is on Mr Bennett, for Elizabeth, who has spent much of the novel complaining of Darcy’s arrogance and pride, is now very much in love with him. Elizabeth tries to enter into her father’s joke but cannot quite, her desire for just such a proposal is too great. Mr Bennett believing only her pride to be hurt by this joking advises her not to mind, “For what do we live . . .?”. In Changing Places, Morris Zapp proposes to consider Austen from “every conceivable angle, historical, biographical, rhetorical, mythical, Freudian, Jungian, existentialist, Marxist, structuralist, Christian-allegorical, ethical, exponential, linguistic, phenomenological, archetypal, you name it”. We must be less ambitious here.

Pride and Prejudice began its life over 200 years ago as First Impressions. First Impressions was rejected by the publisher to whom it was submitted. This is pleasingly ironic to us now, for we can see that the book is, among all those other things, an extended caution about the danger of drawing false first impressions. As an editor, however, it is hard not to sympathise with that publisher.

Which brings me to the Annals of Oncology prizes. The prizes are an attempt to recognise the best published articles in the categories of translational science, phase I, phase II and phase III studies. Each prize, worth €1000, has been judged by an editorial subcommittee in the areas of innovation, scientific quality and potential impact on the field, the pillars upon which Annals of Oncology is founded. Our aim has been to reward and recognise those researchers who support the journal and strive with us to achieve excellence.

Producing a scientific journal on a monthly cycle has a great potential to be unrewarding. We are always looking to the next issue, which, like the future, never arrives. Judging the prizes has afforded us the opportunity to look back at the last 2 years of Annals of Oncology. First impressions loom large. Journal editors the world over talk up the quality of their peer review process. I certainly believe that, thanks to the hard work of editors, referees and staff, our peer review process is second to none. But can we admit here that peer review is the systematising of first impressions? I think so. Happy indeed is the journal editor who has cause to think he has not been led astray by those first impressions.

Imagine then, our satisfaction in presenting the first Annals of Oncology prizes. The strongest impression we took from the exercise was the wealth of high quality material from which to choose, the strength, if you will, of those first impressions. But a journal can only publish the articles it receives, which to choose, the strength, if you will, of those first impressions. Annals of Oncology prize for translational science

“ErbB2 status and the benefit from two or five years of adjuvant tamoxifen in postmenopausal early stage breast cancer”, by Stal et al. [2].
Annals of Oncology prize for phase I studies

“Phase I study of BBR 2778, a newaza-anthracenedione, in advanced or refractory non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma”, by Borchmann et al. [3].

Honourable mentions must also go to: “Second-line carboplatin and gemcitabine in platinum sensitive ovarian cancer—a dose-finding study by the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Gynakologische Onkologie (AGO) Ovarian Cancer Study Group”, by du Bois et al. [4]; and to “Clinical and pharmacological phase I study with accelerated titration design of a daily times five schedule of BBR3464, a novel cationic triplatinum complex”, by Sessa et al. [5].

Annals of Oncology prize for phase II studies

“Activity and toxicity of GI147211 in breast, colorectal and non-small-cell lung cancer patients: an EORTC-ECSG phase II clinical study”, by Gamucci et al. [6].

Honourable mentions also go to: “A three-week schedule of gemcitabine–cisplatin in advanced non-small-cell lung cancer with two different cisplatin dose levels: a phase II randomized trial”, by Rinaldi et al. [7]; and to “Activity of the dolastatin analogue, LU103793, in malignant melanoma”, by Smyth et al. [8].

Annals of Oncology prize for phase III studies

“Reduction of chemotherapy-induced febrile leucopenia by prophylactic use of ciprofloxacin and roxithromycin in small-cell lung cancer patients: an EORTC double-blind placebo-controlled phase III study”, by Tjan-Heijnen et al. [9].

A final honourable mention goes to: “Superiority of high-dose platinum (cisplatin and carboplatin) compared to carboplatin alone in combination chemotherapy for small-cell lung carcinoma: a prospective randomised trial of 280 consecutive patients”, by Hirsch et al. [10].

My congratulations and thanks to all these authors.

Those of you unfamiliar with Pride and Prejudice may rest assured that a proposal of marriage is received from Mr Darcy and Elizabeth, finally, accepts it gladly. Darcy, as Elizabeth, tells her father, has no false pride. I believe too that my pride here, essentially pride in the work and trust of others, is not misplaced. And, if you think this is all too much, remember the wise words of Miss Austen: “There is safety in reserve, but no attraction”.

But perhaps we should save Emma for the next set of prizes. I am looking forward to them.

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References