



AT THE HEART OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION DEBATE

Who is Stronzo Bestiale?

30 October 2014 | By [Chris Parr](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/who-is-stronzo-bestiale) (URL=[/chris-parr/1185.bio](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/who-is-stronzo-bestiale))

A blogger gets to the bottom of tale concerning a physicist whose name means 'total asshole' in Italian



Source: [LinkedIn](#)

Vito Tartamella, author and managing editor of the science monthly *Focus*

"Would you read a paper written by Stronzo Bestiale [translation – total asshole]?" asks [a post on Parolacce](http://www.parolacce.org/2014/10/05/the-true-story-of-stronzo-bestiale) (URL=<http://www.parolacce.org/2014/10/05/the-true-story-of-stronzo-bestiale>) – the self-declared "only italian scientific blog on profanity".

"A dose of mistrust would be justified: the name says it all," the post continues. "Yet, in 1987, professor Bestiale, supposedly a physicist in Palermo, Sicily, authored major papers in prestigious scientific peer reviewed journals such as the *Journal of Statistical Physics*, the *Journal of Chemical Physics* and the proceedings of a meeting of American Physical Society in Monterey."

The blog – highlighted to *Times Higher Education* after [our story](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/hidden-leopard-skin-g-string-exposed/2016392.article) (URL=<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/hidden-leopard-skin-g-string-exposed/2016392.article>) about the French phrase for "your mother in a leopard-skin G-string" being included in a paper – is written by Vito Tartamella, author and managing editor of the science monthly *Focus*, and it goes on to detail his investigations into the veracity of Mr Bestiale's publication record.

"I tried to find this person in Italian telephone directories," he says. "In Italy there are 7 Bestiale, mostly in Piedmont. None of them, however, has the name Stronzo (Turd or Asshole: who would call their own son that?)"

It turns out, unsurprisingly, that Stronzo Bestiale does not exist. The name appears "in the papers authored by Bill Moran and William G. Hoover, two influential American scientists from the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory".

Dr Tartamella wrote to Professor Hoover, now retired, to ask him the true story of Stronzo Bestiale.

He was told that while travelling on a flight to Paris, Professor Hoover had been sat next to two Italian women who “spoke among themselves, saying continually: ‘Che stronzo (what an asshole)!’, ‘Stronzo bestiale (total asshole)’.”

The phrases stuck in Professor Hoover’s mind, so he found out what Stronzo Bestiale meant. He decided the name would be the perfect co-author for a paper that had been refused publication by two journals already, so he “decided to submit my papers again, simply by changing the title and adding the name of that author”. The paper was published.

Although not everyone took the joke well (the then president of the Italian Physical Society described it as an offence “to the entire Italian scientific community”), it “laid bare how vulnerable control systems in the review of scientific research were (and still are!)”, Dr Tartamella writes.

“Incredibly, even today, 27 years later, Stronzo Bestiale continues to be present as the author of publications in scientific databases: is it not extraordinary?”

The post was picked up by the [Retraction Watch blog](http://retractionwatch.com/2014/10/09/should-papers-be-retracted-if-one-of-the-authors-is-a-total-asshole) (URL=<http://retractionwatch.com/2014/10/09/should-papers-be-retracted-if-one-of-the-authors-is-a-total-asshole>), which points out that “this isn’t the first time a scientist has added a fictional co-author to a paper to make a point”. “In 1978, Polly Matzinger added her impeccably-named Afghan hound, Galadriel Mirkwood, to a *Journal of Experimental Medicine* paper to protest the use of passive voice in scientific papers.

“Hilarious as these examples are, it does prove a point that’s a little less fun: The scientific community needs to be on its toes about who (or what) is writing the papers they publish, to help keep *merde* out of the literature.”

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