

“Some say the world will end in fire, some say in ice . . .”

. . . and there are definitely worse possibilities. When one language adopts words from another, it sometimes happens that standard spelling changes create a new pair of homonyms, making two words that were quite different in the source language indistinguishable. Everyone who has studied even a little Spanish knows that a ‘llama’ is not only a wooly Andean beast, as in English, but also a ‘flame’, as well as a verb meaning ‘calls’. We all learned ‘¿cómo se llama?’ on the first day. The beast’s name comes from Quechua, but the other two both come straight from Latin: in the transition to Castilian, initial FL and CL both became LL, the noun lost its double consonant, and the verb its final T and the length of the first A, all of which combined to make the very different *flamma* and *clāmat* indistinguishable as *llama*.

Years ago I ran across a second, more Classical, example in Castilian Spanish: it does not distinguish Thetis, sea-nymph and mother of Achilles, from her aunt Tethys, wife of Oceanus. The standard change of TH to T and of Y to I has turned both into Tetis.¹ Since both are sea goddesses, it can be difficult to tell whether a particular Tetis in a Spanish text is Thetis or Tethys, unless Achilles is mentioned in the context.²

I recently ran across a third, even more amusing, example, again in Spanish. In both Castilian and Catalan,³ ‘Escatología’ means Eschatology, the branch of theology dealing with the Four Last Things, Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell, but it also means Scatology, the science of excrement. Do Spanish-speakers giggle when they hear a theologian described as a distinguished ‘Profesor de Escatología’? Can we (or they) be quite sure there are no professors of Scatology? In Robertson Davies’ *The Rebel Angels*, Professor Ozias Froats works in the Department of Biology, though his particular field of

¹ Viquipèdia and Wikipédia tell me that the same is true for Catalan Tetis and Portugese Tétis.

² As A. A. Parker notes in his edition of Calderón’s *No Hay Mas Fortuna de Dios* (70), “Tetis is the Spanish form of Thetis (the chief of the Nereids and mother of Achilles) and of Tethys (the wife of Oceanus). Both represent the sea; but since the name here is being used to describe the sunset, the latter, or specifically Atlantic goddess, is intended.” A classicist might quibble with some of this – is Thetis the chief Nereid or just the most notorious of the sisters? – but the point is clear.

³ I confirmed the Catalan use at the Institut d’Estudis Catalans’ *Diccionari Català-Valencià-Balear*, which I found in LanguageHat’s very useful list of language resources (right margin). If Wikipédia is to

study is certainly Scatology. I suppose some Humanities professors might also qualify for the title, at least informally, if they spend their time in the literal or metaphorical sewers of Literature, Art, and History.

be trusted, Portuguese sensibly prefers ‘Coprologia’ for the study of excrement, which avoids ambiguity.