

### Martial's Gloomy Ethiopian (7.87)

One of Martial's most interesting epigrams lists eight exotic pets with the names of their passionate owners, followed by a hard-to-interpret joke:<sup>1</sup>

Si meus aurita gaudet lagalopece Flaccus,  
 si fruitur tristi Canius Aethiope;  
 Publius exiguae si flagrat amore catellae,  
 si Cronius similem cercopithecon amat;  
 delectat Marium si perniciosus ichneumon,                   5  
 pica salutatrix si tibi, Lause, placet;  
 si gelidum collo nectit Glaucilla draconem,  
 lusciniio tumulum si Telesilla dedit:  
 blanda Cupidinei cur non amet ora Labyrtae  
 qui videt haec dominis monstra placere suis?           10

What is interesting – and disturbing – about this poem is that the second pet, after the fennec and before the tiny puppy, the Barbary ape, the mongoose, the magpie, the snake, and the nightingale, is an Ethiopian. Galán Vioque (ad loc.) would like to think this is a species of flat-faced, man-sized black Egyptian fish called an *Aithiops*, but that seems unlikely, though wealthy Romans did keep pet fish (e.g. Domitian, Martial 4.30). Watson and Watson, in their 'green and gold' commentary, where this is number 53, write:

gloominess was not especially associated with Ethiopians, but two statuettes of the Hellenistic period show black Africans with plaintive expressions.

That is not a lot to go on, and I see no reason to suppose that this particular Ethiopian's gloominess is supposed to be characteristic of his race. Surely it is more likely that he is gloomy because he knows, what the other seven do not know, that he is being kept as a pet. (Does Canius show him off as such to Flaccus and Publius and the rest? Is his choice of pet a pun, because his own name means 'Whitey'?) As the Watsons note, the wording also implies that he "may have been a *delicium*, a bed-mate of Canius": *fruor* often means 'enjoy sexually'. Though that would tend to raise him above the status of the other seven pets, it would not be surprising if it increased his gloom in other ways.

<sup>1</sup> This is my own tentative text. None of the variants affect my argument here, and I have nothing to say about the meaning of 9-10, which I am still thinking about.