Martial, Part 2: Issa (I.109)

In a poem written more than one hundred years after Catullus wrote his eulogy for Lesbia’s pet sparrow, Martial dries the tears of those who mourn a deceased pet in any century. Issa, the lap-dog of his friend Publius, however, is still very much alive. Although often sharply satirical, Martial’s description of this pampered pooch and the adoration of her owner, appears affectionate and sincere. Or is it?

Text and Translation

Issa est passere nequior Catulli,
Issa is naughtier than the sparrow of Catullus,

Issa est purior osculo columbae,
Issa is purer than the kiss of a dove,

Issa est blandior omnibus puellis,
Issa is more seductive than all the girls,

Issa est carior Indicis lapillis,
Issa is more precious than Indian diamonds,

1. Issa, -ae, f.: island in the Adriatic Sea; here, the name of the pet dog  
   passere: passer, -eris, m.: sparrow  
   nequior: nequam (comparative of indeclinable adjective): naughty  
   Catulli: Catullus, -i, m.: Roman poet; see Recitation 25

2. purior: purus, -a,-um: pure  
   osculo: osculum, -i, n.: kiss (diminutive of os, “mouth”)  
   columbae: columba, -ae, f.: dove

3. blandior: blandus, -a, -um: flattering; here, seductive

4. carior: carus, -a, -um: dear; here, precious  
   Indicis: Indicus, -a, -um: Indian  
   lapillis: lapillus, -i, m.: little gem (diminutive of lapis, “stone”); here, diamond
Issa est deliciae catella Publi,
Issa is the darling of Publius, his tiny puppy.

Hanc tu, si queritur, loqui putabis.
If she whines, you will think (that) she (lit. “this [dog]”) is speaking.

Sentit tristitiamque gaudiumque. . .
She feels both sadness and joy. . .

et desiderio coacta ventris
and (when) compelled by the impulse of her bladder

gutta pallia non fefellit ulla,
not a single drop has (ever) befouled the covers,

5.  deliciae: deliciae, -arum, f. (Latin plural for English singular): darling
catella: catella, -ae, f.: little dog (feminine diminutive of catulus, “young animal”)
Publi: Publius, -i, m.: Roman name

6.  queritur: queror, queri, questus sum (deponent verb): whine
loqui: loquor, loqui, locutus sum (deponent verb): speak

7.  tristitiam: tristitia, -ae, f.: sadness
gaudium: gaudium, -i, n.: joy

10. desiderio: desiderium, -i, n.: impulse
coacta: cogo, -ere, coagi, coactum: compel
ventris: venter, ventris, n.: stomach; here, bladder

11. gutta: gutta, -ae, f.: drop
pallia: pallium, -i, n.: coverlet
fefellit: fallo, -ere, fefelli, falsum: deceive; here, befoul
ulla: ullus, -a, -um: any; here, a single

12. blando: see above, note #3; here, sweet
pede: pes, pedis, m.: foot; here, paw
suscitat: suscito (1): arouse from sleep; here, nudge
toro: torus, -i, m.: couch
sed blando pede suscitat toroque
but with her sweet paw she nudges (you) and from the couch
deponi monet et rogat levari.
warns (you that she needs) to be put down and asks to be lifted (back) up.
Castae tantus inest pudor catellae,
There is a very great sense of modesty in this virtuous little puppy,
ignorat Venerem; nec invenimus
she does not know Love; nor do we find
dignum tam tenerā virum puellā.
a mate worthy of a girl so delicate.
Hanc ne lux rapiat suprema totam,
In order that (her) last day not snatch her altogether,

13. deponi: depono, -ere, -posui, -positum: put down
   levari: levo (1): lift up

14. castae: castus, -a, -um: morally pure; here, virtuous
   inest: insum, inesse, infui (+ dative): be in
   pudor: pudor, -oris, m.: sense of modesty
   catellae: see above, note #5; dative with inest

15. ignorat: ignoro (1): not to know
   Venerem: Venus, -eris, f.: goddess of love; here, (sexual) love
   nec: (negative particle) not; here, nor

16. dignum: dignus, -a, -um: worthy
   tam: (adverb) so
   tener_: tener,-era, -erum: delicate

17. lux ... suprema: literally, “last light”; euphemism for death
   totam: here, altogether
pictā Publius exprimit tabellā,
Publius portrays (her) in a painted picture,

in quā tam similem videbis Issam,
in which you will see an Issa so similar

ut sit tam similis sibi nec ipsa.
that she herself is not so similar to herself.

Issam denique pone cum tabellā:
In short, place Issa alongside (her) picture:

aut utramque putabis esse veram,
either you will think that one is real,

aut utramque putabis esse pictam.
Or you will think that the other is painted.

18. pictā: pingo, -ere, pinxi, pictum: paint
exprimit: exprimo, -ere, -pressi, -pressum: portray
tabellā: tabella, -ae, f.: small painting (diminutive of tabula, “tablet”)

21. denique: (adverb) in short
pone: pono, -ere, posui, positum: place

22-23. aut ... aut: (conjunction) either ... or
utramque: uterque, utraque, utrumque: one, the other