In a relatively neglected chapter of his book, *Auctor and Actor*, Jack Winkler explores some of the connections that he finds in the sensibilities of the author of the anonymous *Life of Aesop* and Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*. “Vulgarity, obscenity, and flouting of conventional decorum are high on the list of common qualities.”¹ Like mime, Winkler argues, the *Life of Aesop* is an expression of popular thinking otherwise largely lost because it was generally oral and subliterary. He sees Aesop as a traditional type of Grotesque Outsider whose criticisms of authority and hierarchies are licensed within the conventions of mime, which derived from figures such as Thersites and Margites.² Aesop’s wisdom is thus also Socratic because it is aporetic and resistant to cultural norms. Apuleius, according to Winkler, does not so much descend to the level of the slapstick mime as he exploits its possibilities by speaking through the fatuous persona of Lucius and the mocked, abused, grotesque ass.³

H.J. Mason, in a compact paragraph within his essay, “*Fabula Graecanica*: Apuleius and his Greek Sources,” suggests more broadly the importance of considering not simply the *Vita Aesopi* in connection with Apuleius, but the Aesopic fable, as “a form of literature which assumes that animals think like humans” (Mason [1978] 10). Mason points to the presence in the *Metamorphoses* (and almost certainly in the Greek original) of known Aesopic fables, and the quite explicit narration of the *Fox and the Crow* at *De Deo Socratis* praeft. 4 (Fr. *Flor.* 4, Beaujeu), which is designated by Apuleius as a *fabula*. Mason thinks it possible that Apuleius had access to a version of the *Vita Aesopi*.⁴

Both of these critics make compelling arguments for considering Aesop’s fables and the figure of Aesop himself in the *Vita Aesopi* as

¹ Winkler (1985) 280.
² On Aesop as a blame poet, see also Nagy (1979) 279-88.
³ Winkler (1985) 276-91.
⁴ Mason (1978) 10.
important elements of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*. Nonetheless, I only came upon the *Life of Aesop* by accident since Aesop has been coopted and domesticated in ways that make him seem far from the iconoclastic “grotesque outsider” described by Winkler, and deter even mildly subversive people from reading him. Yet, while the tame fable of the ‘Tortoise and the Hare’ teaches us to persevere slowly and tediously in order to succeed, others, such as the ‘Horse and the Ass’ (Babrius 7) or the ‘Donkey and the Wolf’ (Babrius 122) present a brutal and socially conscious view of reality; still others, such as ‘Aesop and the Farmer’ (Phaedrus 3.3), cross all lines of modesty. When I finally read the *Life*, it became at once obvious to me that the episode in which Isis and the Muses give Aesop a voice offers an important support for my arguments about the function of Isis in the *Metamorphoses*. Further, the figure of the lowly Bakhtinian Aesop and his stories of talking animals can illuminate the much-discussed meaning of the *fabula*. While there is room for further investigation of the connections between Apuleius and Aesop, in this paper the connections I wish to draw between the *Metamorphoses* and the *Life of Aesop* are two-fold. The first part functions as a sort of supporting footnote to my earlier arguments about Isis in the *Metamorphoses*; the second explores more generally the intersections between Apuleius and Aesop in terms of the negotiation of elite and popular/written and oral language.

Use of the *Vita Aesopi* in connection with Apuleius presents several problems, however, as the text itself is of uncertain date and provenance and appears in several recensions which differ significantly from one another.5 It is dated in its present form by two of its major experts to an era roughly contemporary with Apuleius; a Ber-

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5 There are several recensions, of which G and W (Greek) are fuller; of these G, which I follow here, offers details absent from the probably Byzantine W. The Latin version, the *Vita Lolliana*, underwent alterations in antiquity and the Middle Ages and is much scantier. In fact, the passage most important to my argument, that of Isis granting Aesop a voice, is absent from the Latin version and is markedly different in W. It is Tyche who gives Aesop a voice in the latter rather than Isis, interesting in light of Isis’ self-designation at Met. 11.15 as Fortuna Videns. On the various recensions, see especially Holzberg (1993). The text is an amalgamation of materials from different eras. Some parts date back at least to the fifth century BC, according to M.L. West (1984) 126 who believes that at Aristophanes *Birds* 471-2 the verb παντοδιδύμοι implies perusal of a book and hence may imply some written Aesopic tradition as early as Aristophanes. He also points to a pseudo-Herodotean *Life of Homer* of the 1st or 2nd century BC as an analogy and generally suggests that the story of the slave Aesop developed into a novella as early as the 5th century.