ON ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS OF THE REPUBLIC

BY

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Thanks to the painstaking investigations of Gerard Boter, we now have a meticulous account of the textual tradition of the Republic; it is a big step forward\(^1\). Understandably, it is the medieval manuscripts that get the lion's share of Boter's attention. He does not ignore the pre-medieval manuscripts, but no attempt is made to integrate them within an account of the history of the text. The medieval manuscripts get well over 200 pages, the ancient ones a bare six, trailing as an appendage (chap. 6, The Papyri, pp. 252-7). Of course this is theoretically the wrong way around, but the accidents of survival rob it of paradoxicality. We have only fragments of ancient manuscripts, and to say they are not very sizable fragments would be something of an understatement. What is more, the papyri are upstart accessions to the tradition. It is perhaps inevitable that they should be relegated to adjunct status, and anachronistically viewed against the background of the medieval manuscripts. But it is worth remembering that papyri are manuscripts too, and the only manuscripts that afford us direct access to the text in antiquity. When Boter says that the papyri of the Republic—there are eleven of them in all—"have very little to tell us" and "have hardly any importance" for the history of the text, he is not so much guilty of exaggeration as the victim of an unduly restricted viewpoint. The scanty remnants of ancient copies of the Republic certainly contribute less than the more extensive remains of some of the other dialogues, and the evidently good quality of the medieval tradition (or at least its fairly good catchment of the range of readings current in post-Ptolemaic times) means that Platonic papyri in general do not lead to such drastic

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textual amelioration as is the case with some other authors, but even within the confines that he has set for himself Boter's assessment calls for qualification. His inadequate treatment of the ancient manuscripts is all the more disappointing as being a missed opportunity: Boter's already substantial contribution to scholarship could have been all the greater if he had properly taken them into account. I will briefly indicate what I mean.

Without the papyri, we would be almost wholly dependent on the indirect tradition for documentary control on the quality of the medieval tradition. It is recognized that the medieval manuscripts enjoy no monopoly of truth, but any assessment of just how much truth is lost to them, and of what kind, must depend fundamentally on the unmediated evidence of the ancient texts themselves. For the Republic, none of this evidence is older than the second century C.E.: still a long way from Plato, but halving the distance. And the total amount of preserved text is very meagre: it would be rash to undertake an assessment without at least glancing across the border to other less fragmentarily represented dialogues, and in neglecting to do so Boter handicaps himself. The textual lessons of the Plato papyri are not dramatic, but they are worth having. (1) By giving some indication of the range and kind of readings in circulation in the Roman period—the evidence is less extensive than we would wish, but all of it is rock-solid—they introduce an element of certainty into the welter of guesswork and blind faith that any attempt to reconstruct the history of the text would otherwise consist of. From this point of view they would be very valuable even if they offered no new readings at all. As it is, they complement the unusually rich indirect tradition, whose authority they enhance. The upshot is that we gain assurance that what was lost to the tradition in its precarious passage from the Roman period to the middle ages was not very different in nature from what was not, while at the same time we are compelled to recognize that the medieval tradition's coverage of what was earlier current is far from complete. Whether we see this state of affairs as a bottle half full or a bottle half empty will vary according to temperament. (2) By giving glimpses of the textual make-up of actual ancient manuscripts vis-à-vis the medieval ones, the papyri throw light on the textual history of the individual medieval manuscripts, whether primary or secon-