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## Main content

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Introduction

THERE IS AN IRONY about the use of red as an element of textual articulation. Its role over the several centuries before the invention of printing was to be visible, and thereby to distinguish what was rendered in red from other parts of the text. But to many modern scholars of the printed book, red is an invisible element, written off as insignificant because it is assumed to be merely decorative. Manuscript specialists, including the palaeographers Christopher de Hamel and J. P. Gumbert, are well aware of the value of red in medieval books, but incunabulists and those studying early printed books have, on the whole, ignored it, or worse, categorised it as part of the early printers' attempts to imitate manuscripts. (1) This paper aims to demonstrate the articulatory value of red as it was used in incunables, and so to make the case for a better understanding of the use of colour in books during the transition from manuscript to print, as it had been used in their manuscript predecessors.

The reasons behind the neglect of red may lie in our ambiguous attitude to the term decoration in relation to books. On the one hand we find that manuscript specialists equate decoration with what I am calling textual articulation, which is the system within a book that signals to the reader the structure of the text and the relationships of parts of a text to each other. It sets up a hierarchy, which uses relations of size and elaborateness of treatment (in terms of the number of colours and the use of gold and historiation); the hierarchy is applied to the books, chapters and subsections of chapters so that, for example, ten-line initials indicate books, and three-line initials chapters, etc. On the other hand, we find scholars of later books apparently partaking of the modernist distaste for decoration as a mere 'knick-knack on the mantel piece'. (2) For them decoration is adventitious, and to be avoided. The use of red in books has been caught up in this ambiguous attitude because of its own development over time. The very important role of red in the textual articulation of incunables more or less disappeared when, some time in the early sixteenth century, the texts of books became monochrome and fully functional in black and white. Red was retained for a few categories of books, in particular liturgical books and some legal books. And it was always available for luxury books. But apart from these uses, the red that remained was indeed used decoratively in the dismissable sense, often isolated on the title-page where it might be used for alternate lines, or to pick out a few words. This later role for red may be largely responsible for the scholarly assumption that red was, and had always been, basically decorative. Once placed in that category, it became invisible and scholars have become colour-blind. Or they are inclined to search for symbolic meaning where there may be none.

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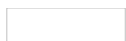
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