The transition from manuscript to print technologies was not smooth. This was due in part to the barriers of producing early printed books, which were not only labour-intensive and had high start-up costs (the press, the type, the expertise), but also threatened tradition, which in monasteries might include book-copying as an element of ora et labora. But another hindrance to print was its plainness; though it was efficient, the printing press eliminated much of what people sought from their books. As opposed to sumptuous manuscripts on parchment that were decorated with gold and colours, printing was austere, monochrome and usually on paper that came from an inert vegetal source (flax) rather than a once-animated beast. Trading all of these features for cheapness was a hard sell. Moreover, the very cheapness of books threatened the handmade uniqueness that made the manuscript not just an assemblage of text, but a reflection of its owner. If books could be made in multiples, then recipients would have indistinguishable copies. This could never be said of a manuscript, which was defined by its variability. The result of the transition in the decades flanking 1500 was an era of hybrids, books produced to take advantage of the printing press's efficiency while preserving the value – material and social – of the manuscript. This article addresses books made in the period of experimentation before the consolidation of typography in the course of the sixteenth century.

Some of the first results of the early printing were not fully printed books, but hybrids. Rather than submitting to total dominance of a new technology over an older one (a concept that our progressive models of history demand that we a priori see as not only having occurred, but as necessary and proper), book makers and artists in the early years of the printing press saw the new technology as offering, like the manuscript itself, certain advantages and drawbacks. They selectively used both technologies as needed, in the same book. The results merged prints and illumination, hand-drawn imagery and machine-produced multiples. Partly at stake were labour, expense and the fact that book owners and producers were loath to forego the realm of decorative colour that illumination had offered. The techniques could themselves be hybrid; stamped (block printed) woodcuts were inked and pressed by hand onto a support. This paper follows contemporary usage and uses ‘print’ to denote impressions from a matrix, whether made with manual pressure (i.e. stamped) or in a printing press. The Birgittines of the Netherlands experimented with a new way of making books in which extraordinary colour was used to bridge the gap between print and manuscript. They aimed these books at their own members, who were defined by prayer and ritual as stipulated by the rather uniform breviary from which each member prayed. However, it was not the rather uniform prayer text that they printed, but rather its more unscripted imagery. The woodblocks used for these books were recycled from earlier projects and were not made expressly for these breviaries. Using these blocks represents, I believe, an experiment.

Whereas usually the main argument for printing is multiplication, here, I believe, the motivation was to introduce figurative imagery without having to develop extensive skill in mastering drawing. The Birgittines were not necessarily making an edition, but might have been testing the possibilities of a new technology. Not only printed books but also manuscripts benefitted from the printing/handmade hybrid, as suddenly any manuscript – even a relatively low-end one – could have illustrations. In the second half of the fifteenth century, conventual ateliers began experimenting with techniques for providing instant illuminations to manuscripts. This happened especially in the eastern Netherlands, where manuscript makers stuck printed images into manuscripts, then painted around them. Ursula Weekes has shown the extent to which pasting paper prints into parchment manuscripts occurred around Arnhem.\(^1\) The next generation of experiments went further: during the first decade of the sixteenth century, one of the Birgittine monasteries in

---

the Northern Netherlands began commissioning, or possibly producing, Psalter-Breviaries that combined the old way of writing the texts (in manuscript) and a new way of contributing the images (as prints), stamping the latter directly onto the parchment text leaves. Two of these manuscripts survive, but they have not been studied, because one is ensconced in a private collection, and the other is in a little-explored South American collection (Rio de Janeiro, Biblioteca Nacional, Ms. 50.3.19). However, they are important witnesses to the development of printing and the use of colouring in that process. One could see these Birgittine books as manuscripts with the production of their illustrations partly mechanised, thus still ‘normal’ manuscripts. However, they offer a different trajectory for understanding the adoption of the printing press as it not only proceeded simultaneously with the manuscript tradition, but indeed mated with it.

Other Early Experiments in Manuscripts, Printing and Colour

The creation of such hybrids posed peculiar problems that might be eliminated in later, single-medium books. As the convents around Arnhem and other experimenters in Northern Europe and England in the second half of the fifteenth century found, prints on paper do not take colour or gilding particularly well. Such is the case in the often-reproduced English manuscript on parchment from c.1490 with a hand-painted woodcut printed on paper depicting Christ as Man of Sorrows, pasted onto a folio dyed deep red and painted with repeated wounds in shiny viscous paint of the same colour (British Library, Egerton 1821). The parchment border throbs with immediacy. In the printed image, in contrast, the watercolour washes are dully absorbed into the fibre of the paper. Colouring on paper had its limitations. This mismatch of media could create tension within the book specifically in the realm of colour.

One solution to this problem was to eliminate colour entirely from the print and relegate it to the parchment mount. But other artists experimented with a different solution: printing directly on parchment, a material that takes the colour well and can withstand the wear when gold is applied to its surface and burnished vigorously. Printing made images more available since a mechanically reproducible image does not require that the book printer has a draftsman’s skills. Combining techniques in this way presumably brought costs down while maintaining a homogeneous material (parchment) allowing for sumptuous colour. One manuscript with a full cycle of woodcut images printed on parchment has been dismantled; the individual leaves are in the British Museum (1856,1011.1–28). In recent history they were pasted onto cardboard mounts, and consequently the text on the versos cannot be read. It is clear, however, that the woodcuts originally formed a cycle in a small prayerbook and that the texts and images were planned to fit together from the outset. A painter has carefully coloured in the printed lines with modulated bodycolour and then gilded some areas, including all the haloes, to make the prayerbook resemble an illuminated manuscript.

While a variety of book producers used print-script hybrids, the Birgittines in particular developed the print medium to suit the specific needs of their order, both in terms of their collective identity and, relatedly, their particular prayer practices. Their commitment to printing is signalled by their experimentation with a type of single-leaf print that served as corporate identity cards for use both within and without the convent walls. The largest output of such conventual calling cards comes from the convent of Mariënwater, a Birgittine monastery in Rosmalen, just outside Den Bosch in Brabant, near what is now the Dutch-Belgian border. Nuns in the convent of Mariënwater either produced prints themselves or commissioned prints to give away or to sell as souvenirs at their convent. The sisters in Rosmalen specified the name of their monastic house on the print, which ‘branded’

---

3 The only notice for this manuscript appears to be in P. Herkenhoff, Biblioteca Nacional: A Historia de uma Coleção (Rio de Janeiro: Salamandra, 1996), 29, where the manuscript is called a Psalter and Book of Hours and fol. 1 is reproduced.
5 For this manuscript, see D.S. Areford, The Viewer and the Printed Image in Late Medieval Europe. Visual Culture in Early Modernity (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 76–80, with further references.
6 Such is the case with a manuscript prayer book copied on parchment, with the ‘Large Passion’ engravings by Israel van Meckenem pasted onto the folios at major text openings, and marble borders painted around them on the parchment substrates (London, British Museum 158 b r*).