We are all familiar, having seen it so often, with the traditional image of the medieval scribe at work as we know it from contemporary miniatures. Interpreting this image, it seems, presents few problems, for the explanatory text accompanying the majority of reproductions is brief almost to a fault. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that we regard them from a viewpoint situated within our own world. Have we not all learnt to use a pen, and is this skill which we have learnt not essentially the same as the writing which we see portrayed? We draw this parallel almost unconsciously, without pausing to consider the great gulf which separates our day-to-day practice from the copying of books, day in day out, in a formal book script.

It is not until we begin to concentrate on the manuscripts themselves that we really become aware of the differences. Either the contents, or the physical features, or both, will at some time face us with problems which we are incapable of solving by experience. It is one such problem that I wish to discuss here. It is a subject to which attention has been drawn more than once, especially in recent years, but for which no satisfactory explanation has yet been given. I refer to manuscripts with ‘imposed’ sheets.\(^1\)

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* This article is the text of a lecture given on 7 November 1977 when I was the guest of the Department of History of the University of California, Los Angeles.

1 Bibliography, in alphabetical order: