

“SYMPATHETIC TRANSLATION”
AND THE “SCRIBE’S CAPACITY”:
MORRIS’S CALLIGRAPHY AND THE ICELANDIC SAGAS

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In his unpublished *Grundrisse* of 1857-58, Karl Marx raises the problem of how it is possible to reproduce the epics and sagas of heroic oral cultures in the age of industrial capitalism. He asks how modern warfare and mechanical reproduction by printing presses can re-present for the nineteenth century the siege of Troy and the singing of the epics and the sagas: “Is Achilles possible with powder and lead? Or the *Iliad* with the printing press, not to mention the printing machine? Do not the song and the saga and the muse necessarily come to an end with the printer’s bar, hence do not the necessary conditions of epic poetry vanish?” (111).

When Marx later turns in *Capital* to a critique of the division of labour in the printing industry with the resulting deskilling of workers, he sets out the forces and relations of book production that William Morris would resist in his own printing project at the Kelmscott Press in the 1890s. But twenty-five years earlier, Morris and his collaborator Eiríkr Magnússon published twenty-seven saga translations, and Morris wrote out some sixteen of them in variants of six calligraphic scripts, almost as if to demonstrate that the context of epic poetry could be recaptured or at least reconstructed. Morris’s calligraphy demonstrated that the epic and sagas’ “necessary conditions” need not vanish when he translated, illuminated, and published the Icelandic sagas. Morris also named as “Bibles” in his choice of the 100 best books for a series in the *Pall Mall Gazette* the classical epics of Homer, Old Norse poetry, folk tales (Norse and the Grimm collections), the historical accounts of the Scandinavian kings, and the Icelandic sagas. They are “more important than any literature. They are in no sense the work of individuals, but have grown up from the very hearts of the *people*” (*Letters* 2: 414-18).

The circumstances of epic poetry, then, might be reconstructed and reconstituted by changing the modes of production, as when Morris wrote out some sixteen sagas on fine paper and vellum in an italic and Roman calligraphy that he revived from Renaissance models for the first time in the modern world. But it was a simulation of earlier social formations: Morris could not reproduce the pre-mechanical culture of the sagas or the epics, and Marx had explained why: “The