A scholar in Illinois, hoping to commence a research project on the Renaissance, may immediately book a flight to visit the British Library, the Bibliothèque Nationale, or destinations deeper in Europe.

But perhaps staying home in the Midwest would a better place to start.

Tens of thousands of Renaissance-era books are already held in the American Midwest, arriving here via circuitous and inscrutable paths thanks to the efforts of collectors, historians, and scholarly enthusiasts. A 2014 effort begun at Northwestern entitled “Renaissance Books, Midwestern Libraries” (RBML) aims to boost awareness of such books – printed between 1473 and 1800 in the English language or in England and its territories – that can be found far closer to home than libraries a world away.

This collaborative project unites professors, graduate students, undergraduates, librarians, and computer scientists across the region to report these artifacts to the English Short Title Catalogue, the foremost electronic database for scholars and students of early printed materials. Northwestern’s branch of this project has raised the university’s ESTC representation from an initial 188 to over 1,400, just in a few months’ time.

As part of RBML, this exhibit showcases some of the interesting and unusual early printed books held in the Charles Deering McCormick Library of Special Collections. Among these artifacts are books of poetry and prose by eminent Renaissance writers; “used books” bearing traces of their later owners; and educational treatises, Continental literature in translation, and travel guides.

This exhibit was curated by Andrew S. Keener, PhD Student in the Department of English, with contributions from Meghan Costa, Anne Goetz, Lee Huttner, William Pierce, and Raashi Rastogi.