This chapter argues that the intercultural alchemy we call translation has been essential to the construction and dissemination of early modern plays. If this claim seems unfamiliar, that is because the standard histories of drama and theatre fix their canons according to the boundaries of nineteenth-century nation-states, marking out separations that sixteenth-century writers and actors, to say nothing of printers and patrons, either did not recognize or were determined to overstride. The capacity of those plays – both texts and performances – to exceed one culture’s space and time is the key to their resonance and their force. The strongest version of my argument would be, to adapt a remark Umberto Eco once made about the language of Europe, that Renaissance drama simply is translation.1 Justifying this claim requires that we somewhat revise literary history, replacing a tale of discrete unities with one of partnerships, and stressing transformations over traditions. That revision may fall short of what David Cannadine, in a plea to write a history “beyond our differences,” has理想istically called the “undivided past” – but it should restore connections across a field that has been too long and too starkly divided.2

For some time, I have been working to reassemble one scattered narrative of Renaissance drama in translation, namely the circulation of printed and performed plays across Northern Europe throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The scholarship that has helped me to define my terrain, and chart drama’s travels across it, may be classed as historical on the one hand and theoretical on the other. Among recent historians of many stripes, the idea of early modern Northern Europe as a ‘culture area’ has steadily gained currency.3

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1 Umberto Eco’s oft-repeated statement, reportedly made at the Assises de la traduction littéraire in Arles, France, on 14 November 1993, was “The language of Europe is translation”.
3 Current among anthropologists of the Americas by 1916, the term ‘culture area’ was defined in 1939 by A.L. Kroeber as a “geographical unit” harboring a “regionally individualized type or specific growth of culture”; see his Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1939), pp. 1–4. Kroeber distanced this usage from an “old environmentalism” that construed geography as destiny. A reappraisal of the term in
The ground of this consensus is a form of spatial thinking about the past sometimes referred to as ‘geohistory’; the term is Fernand Braudel’s, and his classic study of the Mediterranean world is often cited as the inspiration for a corresponding portrait of the societies living on the coasts of the Northern European plain.\(^4\) The ‘North Sea world’ is now a working concept for archaeologists, geographers, economists, and others, and while no panoramic equivalent of *La Méditerranée et le Monde Méditerranéen* has yet appeared, one cannot read Diarmaid MacCulloch on the Reformation, or David Nicholas on Germanic law, or Jeffrey Chippis Smith on Northern Renaissance art, without a gathering sense of a cultural system whose legacy endures today.\(^5\) Yet literary historians of the period have been comparatively slow on the uptake, especially in Britain, whose traditional ‘island story’ has tended to occlude deep reciprocity with Scandinavia, the Low Countries, and the German-speaking lands.\(^6\)

Even so, the limitation of a phrase like ‘culture area’ is that it too easily appears static. It is a basic enough task to demarcate a geohistorical environment – even an early modern map goes some way towards that goal – but more difficult to show the vibrant interactions, within and without, that kept a system like the North Sea world thriving. What models could foreground the dynamism that cultural translation requires but the archive barely preserves? One idea is to graft a history of culture *areas* to a theory of cultural *ecologies*, a shift enabling us to reconceive of drama and theatre not as stable artifacts or indigenous practices, but rather as media in motion. We can visualize this theoretical move with the help of recent information science. In 2012, an anonymous hacker posted...