What’s in a period name? Had Juliet had asked the question this way, her answer could well prove satisfying to Shakespeareans today. As a group, Shakespeare critics face a similar dilemma when deciding whether what they read is “Renaissance” or “early modern” literature. For some time now, “Renaissance” has dominated the critical culture of Shakespeare studies. But its popularity and cachet do not stop there: “Renaissance” is everywhere we turn. As I write this chapter, in fact, the current telephone book in Austin, Texas, lists more than a dozen “Renaissance” businesses—firms or institutions, that is, that call themselves “Renaissance ________.” These concerns include a computer store, a women’s hospital, a hotel, a builder, a senior living community and beauty shop, a glass company, and a pest control service (this last perhaps an ironic match for a word that promises rebirth). In this context, “Renaissance” is an all-purpose modifier that seems to assure us of the quality of services rendered. A business using “Renaissance” in its name—for instance, “Renaissance Stone Design”—shares a family resemblance with “Prestige Roofing,” “Deluxe Carpet Cleaners,” “Classic Pizza,” and “Elite Electrolysis and Waxing,” all listed in the same telephone book.

The modifiers of these businesses are at once interchangeable and vital. However empty of meaning, however effortlessly contrived, and however poorly they describe the business in question, they are
central to these firms’ identities and testimony that presumption remains the largest asset of contemporary business. We could say that these names succeed not in spite of but because of their indecorum; as claims made against an account that society never balances, what they advertise is less any quality of service than the freedom to boast.

The word “Renaissance” always has been more claim than reality. And although its prevalence in business and in academic writing may suggest that it always has been with us, “Renaissance” as a period label is of relatively recent origin. Its use in relationship to English history and literature is more recent still. While we instinctively think of Shakespeare as a writer of the Renaissance, we could say that he became a Renaissance author not through taking up a pen in the late 1580s or early 1590s, or even when writing the major tragedies of the early 1600s. Instead, Shakespeare became an author of the English Renaissance primarily in the 1920s, when it first became common to speak of an “English Renaissance” at all.

However recent this term, the tenure of Shakespeare as a “Renaissance” playwright has lately come under pressure from other ways of placing him in history. As the present book attests, it is becoming more common to call Shakespeare and his contemporaries “early modern” authors, a label that emphasizes those things about this period of English history and its culture that survived to define the “modern.” If “English Renaissance” has a deceptively short lineage, “early modern England” is even newer as a term to describe and define a historical period. Used by English historians since the early 1960s, it was taken up by literary critics only since the mid-1980s. Although it lacks the glamour of “Renaissance,” “early modern” has its own implications, ones that bear examination.

Knowing something about when and why “Renaissance” and “early modern” came into use puts us in a better position to understand their role in the field and, correspondingly, the field itself. More than an academic exercise, an inquiry of this nature shows us, first, that “periods” themselves have periods—that is, that terms invented to describe the past come into use, and experience their greatest popularity, in identifiable segments of time. Through its interest in the weight of these key words as they fall into discourse, such an examination also helps to define the status of value and belief in current criticism of Shakespeare.

This, therefore, is the subject of this chapter: the names we give to the era of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the genesis of those names, their influence on the way we interpret the past, and their significance for understanding the “Shakespeare” we live with. My ar-