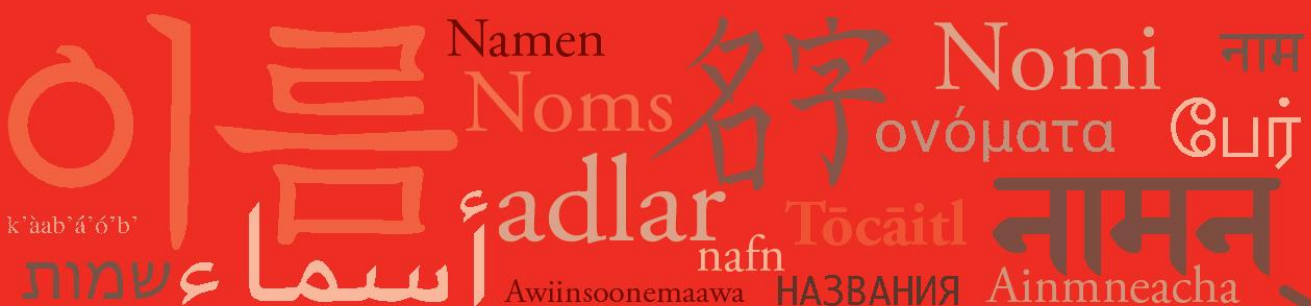




Fatal Address: Proper Name Taboo and the Dead-Naming Prohibition in the Earl Brand / Ribold and Guldborg Tradition

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Abstract

This article examines a specific form of anthroponymic taboo: the prohibition against uttering a combatant's proper name at the decisive moment of battle. Using the Earl Brand / Ribold and Guldborg ballad complex as its central case study, the article argues that this prohibition constitutes a historically meaningful onomastic pattern rather than a merely decorative narrative motif. The study combines close reading of the British and Scandinavian ballad record with comparative onomastic theory and anthropological work on name avoidance, true-name ideology, and verbal danger. The analysis shows that the interdiction "name me not" operates as a context-bound rule of anthroponymic management, one activated under conditions of mortal risk, kin-conflict, and liminality. In the northern ballads, the heroine's breach of this rule triggers the hero's death, thereby converting naming into a fatal speech act. The article further argues that the motif preserves the convergence of two older logics: tactical non-identification in feud warfare and a wider belief that the personal name is an exposed extension of the self. By reframing the motif as an onomastic phenomenon, the article contributes to scholarship on names as socially regulated and pragmatically dangerous forms, and proposes the category "dead-naming prohibition" for traditions in which pronouncing a person's proper name is believed to precipitate injury, capture, or death.

Keywords: anthroponymy, taboo, ballad studies, literary onomastics, dead-naming, medieval studies, Scandinavian studies

Introduction

Names are not only labels. In many linguistic cultures they are socially regulated, pragmatically risky, and ontologically charged. Onomastic research has repeatedly shown that personal names may be avoided, substituted, masked, delayed, or restricted according to kinship, ritual status, grief, danger, and power relations. The present study addresses one such case: a recurrent prohibition against speaking a warrior's proper name during combat. This article proposes the term "dead-naming prohibition" for a context-specific onomastic taboo in which a name is withheld because its utterance is believed to expose its bearer to mortal harm. The phrase is used here in a historical-onomastic sense: not as a modern identity-political term, but as an analytic label for traditions in which naming at a critical moment brings about death or defeat.

The motif of consequential speech restriction in liminal or crisis contexts is broader than any single corpus. In Chrétien de Troyes's *Perceval, ou le Conte du Graal* [Perceval or the Story of the Grail] (c. 1181–91), Perceval's formative onomastic education begins before he ever reaches the Grail Castle: his mother instructs him, in the very act of sending him into the world, to ask the names of those he meets—"Biax fix, encor vos veil dire [. . .]" ("Fair son, I would still tell you [. . .]")—a counsel that constitutes the primary speech-regulatory program of the romance (Chrétien de Troyes, tr. Bryant 2015; Goyette 2016). The subsequent failure at the Grail Castle—where Perceval omits to ask "*Qui l'on en sert?*" ("Whom does it serve?"), a question whose asking would have healed the wounded Fisher King—is therefore not simply a failure of courtesy or compassion, but it is simultaneously a failure of the maternal order, in which the hero has internalized the prohibition against superfluous speech so completely that he suppresses the one question on which everything depends (Goyette 2016). The figure of the Laughing Maiden reinforces this interpretive strand: her laughter marks the gap between the question Perceval should have asked and the silence he produced instead, and feminine wisdom in Chrétien's scheme is precisely the knowledge that male verbal inhibition forecloses (Boryslawski 2005).

The broader onomastic significance of name-withholding in this tradition—the systematic weight of Perceval's reluctance to disclose or receive proper names—is surveyed by Bliss (2008), whose account of naming and namelessness across English, French, and Anglo-Norman romance provides the most sustained scholarly framework for reading such moments as structured anthroponymic choices rather than incidental narrative details. A further structural analogue appears in the Gawain tradition. In Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*, it is specified that Gawain's supernatural strength waxed through the morning hours, reaching its zenith at noon, and thereafter waned—a secret known only to King Arthur and Gawain himself, and one that Lancelot exploited directly once it became known to him (Malory 2017). The disclosure of that physiological vulnerability is therefore functionally equivalent to the disclosure of the proper name in the northern ballads: in both cases, knowledge of a specific personal fact, once communicated to an adversary, converts concealment into defeat. The parallel is not exact, and no direct genealogical connection is claimed between these traditions. It suggests, rather, that crisis-specific verbal interdiction—including the withholding of the proper name, the

suppression of a healing question, and the concealment of physiological timing—constituted a broadly available cultural grammar in medieval northern European tradition; not a peculiarity of any single story-type, but a recurring structural resource activated whenever a narrative required the convergence of mortal danger, a liminal threshold, and an actionable piece of personal knowledge.

The primary evidence for the present argument comes from the Earl Brand corpus in Francis James Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* and its Scandinavian cognates *Ribold og Guldborg* [Ribold and Guldborg] and *Hildebrand og Hilde* [Hildebrand and Hilde], where the hero repeatedly warns the heroine not to call him by name if she sees him bleed or fall; when she does, he receives his mortal wound. The article focuses on this complex as a sustained case study, while acknowledging that the comparative horizon extends considerably further.

A brief contextual note is needed. The Earl Brand / Ribold and Guldborg complex is one of the major northern European tragic elopement narratives: lovers flee, pursuit by the woman's kin follows, the male lover fights, and the encounter ends in his death and usually in the destruction or grief of both houses. Its significance for the present argument lies in the fact that the prohibition on naming is not a marginal ornament attached to one isolated text, but part of a widely distributed narrative complex extending across British, Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish traditions. Child's importance here is not merely canonical. What makes his treatment uniquely valuable for onomastic analysis is his editorial habit of setting the English and Scottish materials into sustained dialogue with Scandinavian analogues, thereby preserving the comparative horizon in which a seemingly obscure motif becomes legible as a recurrent northern pattern. Even for readers thoroughly familiar with Child, it is worth stressing that the present argument depends less on his authority than on the comparative architecture of his commentary.

The argument is threefold. First, the "name me not" formula in these ballads is not incidental but structurally central and textually widespread. Second, the prohibition is best understood through onomastic theory as a special case of name avoidance under conditions of extreme peril. Third, the ballads preserve the overlap of two historical logics that later tradition fused together: a martial logic of non-identification and a religious-magical logic in which the proper name is an actionable extension of the person. The article therefore treats the ballad evidence not simply as literary ornament, but as a witness to the social history of naming.

Theoretical Background

Names as Socially Dangerous Forms

Modern onomastics has moved far beyond etymology and classification toward the study of names as social acts. Hough stresses that names must be studied not only as lexical items but as cultural instruments embedded in historical usage and communicative practice (Hough 2016). In a similar vein, Ainiala, Saarelma & Sjöblom emphasize that personal naming is regulated by convention, ideology, and social evaluation, making the use or withholding of a name a meaningful social act rather than a neutral reference choice (Ainiala, Saarelma & Sjöblom 2012). These approaches create a strong conceptual basis for examining traditions in which a proper name becomes dangerous in use.

A further theoretical step comes from anthropology and folklore. Frazer's classic discussion of name taboos, while methodologically dated in many respects, remains useful as a comparative inventory of the widespread belief that knowledge or utterance of a true personal name can affect the bearer directly (Frazer [1890] 2009). The more precise anthropological value lies not in universalizing explanation but in the recurrent pattern: in many societies, names are withheld in situations of vulnerability, pursuit, mourning, initiation, or supernatural threat. In linguistic anthropology, Silverstein's work on indexicality helps explain why names can acquire context-dependent force: a name does not merely denote; it situates a person within a field of social recognition and actionable consequence (Silverstein 1976). Taken together, these perspectives suggest that a battlefield prohibition on proper-name utterance should be understood as an anthroponymic speech constraint. Such a rule is not simply superstition. It regulates who may identify whom, when, and under what conditions. A proper name in battle can identify, summon, expose, curse, or fix attention. The dead-naming prohibition is therefore best treated as an onomastic restriction with pragmatic and symbolic dimensions.

Name Avoidance, True Names, and Liminality

The ballad evidence also aligns with broader work on taboo and liminality. Douglas argues that ritual danger attaches especially to boundary states, where ordinary categories are unstable and social control intensifies (Douglas [1966] 2002). Battle is one such condition. It is a threshold between life and death, kinship and feud, order and catastrophe. Under such circumstances, onomastic control becomes intelligible: if the person is liminal, the name may become liminal too.

From a folklore perspective, the relevant comparison is not only with stories of magical “true names”, but with situations in which naming is delayed, veiled, or prohibited until a dangerous passage is complete. Linda Dégh notes that oral narrative often preserves fragments of customary belief long after the explanatory worldview has weakened, and that motifs can outlive the social institutions that once made them transparent (Dégh 1995). The Earl Brand material is a compelling example. The fatal effect of naming is fully preserved, while the social rationale for the prohibition survives only in dispersed hints.

Materials and Method

This study uses a qualitative comparative method centered on close textual analysis of the Earl Brand dossier in Child’s edition and Child’s own comparative discussion of Danish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish cognates. His commentary is unusually valuable because it prints both the British texts and a detailed synopsis of the Scandinavian record, including formulaic parallels, motif distribution, and editorial judgments about loss, preservation, and transformation across traditions. The article treats this dossier as a historical onomastic corpus rather than solely a literary one. In practical terms, Child’s edition functions here as a comparative archive: it gathers the Anglophone forms of Earl Brand, juxtaposes them with *Ribold og Guldborg* and *Hildebrand og Hilde*, and repeatedly marks which motifs are fully preserved, weakened, or only faintly traceable in the British record.

The method proceeds in three stages. First, the relevant name-taboo passages are identified in Child’s summaries and variants. Second, these passages are analyzed as onomastic speech rules: who issues the prohibition, under what circumstances, and what consequence follows its breach. Third, the results are interpreted through comparative onomastic and anthropological theory. The article does not claim direct historical proof of a single original custom; rather, it argues that the distribution, formulaic persistence, and narrative centrality of the motif make an onomastic interpretation more convincing than treating it as arbitrary romance decoration.

Results

The Prohibition in the Scandinavian Ballads

The clearest evidence comes from Child’s synopsis of the older Danish versions of *Ribold og Guldborg*. Ribold, preparing to meet the pursuing kinsmen, “bids Guldborg hold his horse, B, C, E¹ and, whatever may happen, not to call him by name: Though thou see me bleed, name me not to death; though thou see me fall, name me not at all!” (Child [1882]/1965, 89). This is the core formula of the dead-naming prohibition. It expressly links the utterance of the proper name with death. The narrative consequence is immediate and consistent. Ribold kills most of the pursuing kin, but when Guldborg, in anguish, calls on him by name to spare her youngest brother, “No sooner was his name pronounced than Ribold received a mortal wound” (Child [1882]/1965, 89).

The same pattern recurs in *Hildebrand og Hilde*. Hildebrand warns Hilde “she must not call him by name if she saw him bleed or fall”, but “Hilde forgot herself, and called out, Hildebrand, spare my youngest brother! Hildebrand that instant received a mortal wound, and fell” (Child [1882]/1965, 90). Child further notes that in several later Danish witnesses, identified by the sigla M, Q, R, S, T, and Z, the explicit formula of dead-naming has weakened, yet the speech restriction itself remains: these texts “have not a specific prohibition of dead-naming, but even these enjoin silence” (Child [1882]/1965, 90). This is a significant observation. It indicates that the overt onomastic wording may erode while the broader speech taboo persists, suggesting a historical process in which the rule survives longer than its full explanation. Put differently, the Danish tradition preserves not only the fully articulated formula “name me not to death”, but also a later stage in which the semantic center of gravity has shifted from the proper name to silence as such. That transition matters for interpretation: it suggests that the name taboo was once understood concretely and later became generalized into a broader interdiction on speech in battle. In onomastic terms, the later Danish forms do not cancel the original taboo; they show its partial abstraction.

The Icelandic and Norwegian Evidence

The Icelandic *Ribbalds kvæði* [The Ballad of Ribbald] makes the prohibition even more emphatic. According to Child's summary, Gullbrún sees her father, eleven brothers, and seven brothers-in-law in pursuit. Ribbald tells her to take up her sewing and "then three times forbids her to name him during the fight" (Child [1882]/1965, 91). The triple prohibition is striking because it ritualizes the speech constraint. This is not casual advice. It has the formal quality of a charged verbal injunction, and in the Icelandic context that formalization seems to preserve a more archaic stage of the taboo than many later Danish and British forms.

The breach again produces instantaneous harm: after the killing of her kin, Gullbrún cries out, "Ribbald, still thy brand!" and "On the instant Ribbald received many wounds" (Child [1882]/1965, 91). The Icelandic material therefore strengthens the onomastic interpretation in two ways. First, it preserves repeated formal prohibition. Second, it links the moment of naming not merely to a later death, but to the immediate onset of wounding. The Icelandic evidence is especially valuable because it dramatizes the taboo not simply as a narrative condition, but as a speech rule renewed and intensified through repetition. Naming here functions almost like the violation of an oath-formula.

The Danish and Icelandic materials also differ in nuance. The Danish corpus, especially in Child's older summaries of *Ribold og Guldborg*, often presents the warning in compact proverbial form—"Though thou see me bleed, name me not to death"—which foregrounds the causal nexus between naming and dying. The Icelandic version, by contrast, expands the prohibition through repeated command, thereby foregrounding procedure and verbal discipline. The Danish evidence therefore preserves the semantic formula of fatal naming with particular clarity, whereas the Icelandic evidence preserves the ritual force of the injunction. Together they make the strongest case that the phenomenon is onomastic, not merely dramatic.

The Norwegian evidence, preserved in Magnus Brostrup Landstad's *Norske Folkeviser* [Norwegian Folk Songs] (Landstad 1853), shows both continuity and erosion. Child groups Landstad's "*Rikeball og stolt Gudbjørg*" [Rikeball and Proud Gudbjørg] (Landstad, 1853, no. 33) and "*Veneros og stolt Olleber*" [Veneros and Proud Olleber] (Landstad, 1853, no. 34) together under the Norwegian branch of the same narrative family. In the former, the tradition agrees closely with the older Danish versions; in the latter it "has been greatly injured" (Child [1882]/1965, 91). This distinction matters for interpretation. The Norwegian forms represent independent witnesses to the same ballad family rather than mechanical borrowings from a Danish source: the hero-knights or vikings Rikeball and Veneros preserve parallel heroic forms within the same inherited narrative structure. Even in the more damaged Veneros version, the underlying speech restriction remains legible. In one copy Veneros explicitly warns the heroine "not to call him by name", and she says she would rather die first, although the crucial text parts are lost (Child [1882]/1965, 91). This naming prohibition suggests that the naming taboo belonged to the deep structural core of the ballad complex rather than to a late local embellishment.

The English and Scottish Evidence

The British texts are textually poorer on this point, and Child says so directly. "Of the knight's injunction, Name me not to death, though thou see me bleed, which [. . .] is kept by nearly every Danish ballad and by the Icelandic, the Norwegian, and by Swedish Ribold and Guldborg [. . .] there is left in English only this faint trace, in Erlinton, A, B: See ye dinna change your cheer until ye see my body bleed" (Child [1882] 1965, 93).

This remark is significant methodologically. It shows that the English corpus alone would not permit a full onomastic reconstruction. The comparative northern corpus, however, makes the lost British element recoverable. Even Earl Brand itself preserves the same narrative architecture without preserving the interdiction equally well. The hero fights the heroine's father and brothers; she intervenes when most of them have fallen; and the intervention is tied to the fatal turn of events (Child [1882] 1965, 100–104). Child repeatedly stresses that the British ballads have lost the "cardinal incident" of dead-naming in its full form while preserving surrounding elements so closely that the original agreement with Scandinavian tradition is "nearly certain" (Child [1882] 1965, 93).

Child's Comparative Conclusion

Child's discussion goes beyond distribution and points toward explanation. He states that "the disastrous effects of naming in a great emergency appear in other northern traditions, though not so frequently as one would expect" (Child [1882] 1965, 95). He then adduces several examples: a troll loses power when named; a nix dies or vanishes when recognized and called by its name; the marvelous horse Blak collapses after his rider cries out its name; a berserker loses force when addressed by name in rage; and in shape-shifting tradi-

tions persons in animal form must not be called by name because naming can force or disrupt transformation (Child [1882] 1965, 95–96).

These comparisons matter because they show that the fatal or disabling effect of naming was not confined to one ballad family. Child, of course, did not formulate an explicit onomastic theory, but his evidence strongly suggests a broader northern belief that names, under extreme conditions, are action-bearing forms.

Discussion

Dead-Naming as an Anthroponymic Taboo

The ballads are best read as preserving a special kind of anthroponymic taboo. In ordinary anthroponymic analysis, the central questions concern form, origin, distribution, or identity marking. Here, by contrast, the issue is restricted utterability. The proper name is available in the language, but unavailable in use under one highly specific circumstance: mortal combat. This matches broader theories of taboo, in which prohibition concerns context rather than absolute lexical impossibility.

The formula “name me not to death” is especially revealing because it grammatically fuses naming and killing. The phrase does not merely mean “do not identify me”, but it encodes a causal theory in which naming can carry the bearer into death. In Austinian terms, the utterance becomes a fatal speech act, not because the heroine intends harm, but because the naming rule defines the context in such a way that violation has lethal consequences. This aligns with the more general anthropological observation that names can function as actionable proxies of the self (Frazer [1890] 2009; Douglas [1966] 2002). Allan and Burridge observe that “calling a name risks malevolence falling on the name-bearer and the caller”, and that names are tabooed across many communities precisely because “an assault on one’s name is treated as comparable with, or even worse than, an assault on one’s body” (Allan & Burridge 2006, 125). Their account of “fear-based taboos”—the belief that “malevolent magic can be wrought with one’s person, bodily effluvia or shadow, so can it be wrought when another person is in possession of one’s true name”—maps directly onto the ballad formula, in which the spoken name does not merely reveal but wounds (Allan & Burridge 2006, 125).

From Feud Secrecy to Verbal Danger

The comparative material suggests that the dead-naming prohibition may preserve the convergence of two historical logics. The first is martial non-identification. In feud-based aristocratic combat, to shout a combatant’s proper name could disclose his identity, lineage, or tactical position at the worst possible moment. Even where battle is already face-to-face, the spoken name may still matter as a social exposure: it fixes the person publicly within a web of vengeance and witness. Child’s own summaries repeatedly show that the combat pits lover against father and brothers, that one younger brother is often spared to carry tidings home, and that kinship identification is central to the whole encounter (Child [1882] 1965, 89–94).

The second is verbal danger attached to the true person-name. Child’s northern comparanda show that in moments of supernatural or liminal intensity, naming can disable, expose, or kill. Once these two logics overlap, the battlefield prohibition becomes highly intelligible: one withholds the proper name both because it identifies and because it acts. Over time, as the original feud logic becomes obscure, tradition may preserve the fatal consequence while forgetting the social rationale. This would explain why some later versions keep only the command to remain silent.

“Micro-Pragmatic Regimes” and the Theory of Onomastic Silence

This case is significant for onomastic theory because it demonstrates that proper names may be governed by what can be called micro-pragmatic regimes: local, context-specific rule systems that determine when a particular name may or may not be spoken, by whom, and with what consequences. These are not general name taboos of the sort that attach to a class of persons or a kinship category across all situations; they are event-bound constraints, activated by a specific combination of participants, setting, and danger, and suspended once that combination dissolves. The same anthroponym that circulates freely in courtship, lament, or domestic exchange becomes prohibited at the moment of mortal combat. The rule is not about the name as such, but about the convergence of the name, the person, and the crisis.

Two features of the ballad material illustrate this precisely. The older Danish versions of *Ribold og Guldborg* show a prohibition that is categorical during the fight and implicitly lifted once the danger has passed: the rule is activated by the onset of combat, not by any standing quality of the name or its bearer. The Icelandic *Ribbalds kvæði* goes further, formalizing the rule through triple repetition, which functions as a kind of verbal contract governing the duration and conditions of the taboo. The micro-pragmatic character of the constraint—bounded, situational, formally instituted—distinguishes it from the more generalized avoidance patterns discussed in much of the comparative literature.

Alford's cross-cultural survey of name taboos documents the practice in 37 of 60 sample societies, demonstrating that context-bound naming restrictions are universal rather than culturally idiosyncratic (Alford 1988). His taxonomy classifies taboos into three principal types: prohibitions on one's own name, prohibitions on the names of specific kin, and prohibitions on the names of the dead. This framework is indispensable as an empirical baseline, and the present analysis builds on it directly. At the same time, the dead-naming prohibition examined here does not fit neatly within Alford's categories: it is neither a kin-based nor a mourning-related restriction, but a combat-specific, situationally activated constraint tied to moments of mortal danger rather than to social role or kinship category. The extension proposed here—a fourth type organized by event-type and crisis threshold rather than by social identity—supplements rather than displaces Alford's framework, and suggests that his taxonomy may be productively broadened to include crisis-specific onomastic regimes.

Allan and Burridge's treatment of naming as a "fear-based taboo" provides the most direct theoretical alignment with the ballad evidence (Allan & Burridge 2006, 125). Their account of the true-name belief—that possession of another's name grants power over that person, so that "he who possessed the true name possessed the very being of god or man, and could force even a deity to obey him as a slave obeys his master"—illuminates why the ballad hero treats his name as a vulnerability to be concealed under combat conditions (Allan & Burridge 2006, 126). Their framework is primarily synchronic and cross-linguistic, drawing on a wide range of contemporary and historical cultures; it does not address medieval or ballad corpora specifically. The present analysis applies their theoretical account to a historically bounded literary tradition, showing that the fear-based logic they describe is not merely an abstract cross-cultural generalization but is directly encoded in the verbal formula of the northern ballads. Where Allan and Burridge treat naming as generically dangerous across contexts, the ballad evidence specifies the conditions under which that danger is actualized: the name becomes lethal not always, but at the precise moment of crisis.

Taken together, Alford's empirical baseline and Allan and Burridge's theoretical account of name-fear provide complementary foundations for the concept of micro-pragmatic regimes. Onomastic scholarship that attends to event-bound name rules, rather than only to standing social categories of avoidance, will find that oral and literary corpora offer evidence unavailable in administrative or legal records. As Hough argues, literary sources, used critically, preserve social attitudes toward names that other archives do not (Hough 2016). The present case supports that judgment and suggests that similar micro-pragmatic structures may be recoverable in other narrative traditions—Old Norse saga prose, heroic epic, and Eddic poetry being obvious candidates—where name-management practices are embedded in narrative without the explicit formulaic marking visible in the ballads studied here.

Conclusion

This article has examined a recurrent pattern in British and Scandinavian traditional ballads that has not previously received a sustained onomastic interpretation: the prohibition against uttering a warrior's proper name at the moment of mortal combat. Taking the Earl Brand / Ribold and Guldborg complex as its primary corpus, the article has demonstrated that this prohibition is neither a random dramatic device nor an arbitrary verse formula, but a structured anthroponymic constraint – context-bound, formulaically stable across widely separated traditions, and connected to a coherent set of beliefs about the actionable efficacy of personal names.

Several findings deserve recapitulation. The textual distribution of the motif is exceptionally wide. The injunction "name me not to death" or its functional equivalents is attested in older and more recent Danish versions of *Ribold og Guldborg*, in the Icelandic *Ribbalds kvæði* (where it is tripled into a formal verbal interdiction), in Norwegian witnesses preserved by Landstad, in Swedish versions, and in traces recoverable in the British *Erlinton* texts (Child's ballad no.8) (Child [1882] 1965, 107–110). This breadth reflects a shared underlying belief system rather than the influence of a single text or literary fashion.

The Danish and Icelandic witnesses together illuminate two distinct stages of the phenomenon. The Danish corpus, particularly the older manuscripts summarized by Grundtvig and taken up by Child, preserves the taboo in its most semantically explicit form: the hero names the consequence directly, fusing naming and dying in a single conditional clause. The Icelandic *Ribbalds kvæði*, by contrast, ritualizes the prohibition

through repetition, pointing toward an older, more ceremonially conceived version of the rule. These two stages, semantic and ritual, are not contradictory; they suggest that the taboo was once multidimensional, with pragmatic, verbal, and ritual aspects that later traditions preserved unevenly.

The Norwegian material shows that the tradition was not a Danish invention that spread northward. The Norwegian forms—Rikeball and Veneros in Landstad's *Norske Folkeviser*—represent independent witnesses to the same ballad family, and their textual damage, far from undermining the argument, actually strengthens it: even heavily eroded versions retain the speech restriction, confirming that the naming taboo was embedded in the structural core of the ballad rather than in its more changeable narrative surface.

The British record, though it has lost the full formula, is interpretable precisely because Child's comparative apparatus preserves the Scandinavian horizon. Without that horizon, the English and Scottish ballads would appear simply as elopement-and-revenge narratives. With it, they become legible as incomplete witnesses to a once fuller tradition that included an onomastic rule now only faintly traceable in the command "See ye dinna change your cheer until ye see my body bleed" (Child [1882] 1965, 108).

The analytic category proposed here—the dead-naming prohibition—has consequences for onomastic theory beyond this ballad corpus. It demonstrates that the study of proper names must account not only for the formation, transmission, and social functions of names as objects of use, but also for their selective suppression. Names do not only communicate; they can harm, expose, and kill in specific cultural framings. This means that a complete theory of anthroponymic practice must include a theory of context-bound onomastic silence. Alongside questions of naming (who names, what is given, when, and why), onomastics must also ask: under what conditions must a name not be spoken, and with what consequences?

The evidence does not warrant the reconstruction of a single original custom operative in every region where the ballads circulated. It does, however, reveal a recurrent nexus of proper-name interdiction, peril, kinship conflict, and fatal consequence that is sufficiently coherent to justify a distinct analytic term. The concept of the dead-naming prohibition may therefore prove useful beyond ballad study, especially in comparative work on martial epic, saga literature, and oral traditions in which names are withheld, assumed, deferred, or strategically disclosed under conditions of crisis, pursuit, transformation, or ritual combat. Particularly suggestive comparanda may be found in several major narrative traditions. In *Odyssey* Book 9, Odysseus gives Polyphemus the false name "Nobody" (Οὔτις [Outis]), a ruse that enables escape because the Cyclops' appeal for help becomes unintelligible to the others. This episode becomes even more significant when Odysseus later reveals his true name in anger, and that disclosure triggers Polyphemus' curse, directly linking name disclosure with peril and delayed fatal consequence.

In the *Mahabharata*'s *Virata Parva*, the Pandavas spend their final year of exile incognito in King Virata's court under assumed identities, and the narrative culminates in martial confrontation when concealed identity and deferred revelation shape the transition from humiliation to military reassertion, especially in Arjuna's return to battle. Irish heroic tradition offers a related but distinct example in the renaming of Setanta as Cú Chulainn, since the acquired warrior-name becomes the name under which his martial identity is thereafter constituted in the heroic world of the *Táin*. Old Norse material is equally suggestive: in *Grímnismál*, Óðinn appears as Grímnir and discloses his identity only at the climax of ordeal, demonstrating once again how concealment and revelation of name can organize narrative danger and authority. Anthropological comparanda broaden the point still further, since the literature on naming includes the secret name used by a senior Avatip hunter (Papua New Guinea) to call crocodiles (Harrison 1985, 1990), as well as Mongolian protective naming customs and restrictions on speaking a child's full name in dangerous or vulnerable contexts. Such cases are not heroic epics, but they support the wider analytical proposition that names may be socially potent, ritually dangerous, and strategically managed across very different cultural systems.

More broadly, this case argues for a productive and still underdeveloped intersection between onomastics, literary history, and the anthropology of speech. Names are not merely data for the historical linguist or the genealogist; they are also cultural instruments whose conditions of use—and non-use—encode deep assumptions about persons, danger, and the power of language. The ballads studied here are among the richest surviving witnesses to that understanding.

Notes

¹ Child cites Scandinavian versions of *Ribold og Guldberg* and related ballads by letter sigla such as A, B, C [. . .] M, Q, R, S, T, Z. These are not abbreviations of place-names or archives, but shorthand for specific variant texts in the editorial sequence he inherited and discussed alongside Grundtvig's edition. Thus, "M, Q, R, S, T, Z" denotes six distinct Danish variant witnesses in Child's comparative apparatus. They are retained here because they are the most precise way to track Child's argument, but they should be read simply as labels for individual versions.

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