

Why I don't like Larks and Ravens (but am not opposed to other gender-neutral terms)

By Diane Silver

(This is a little long and rambling. Highlighting is to help hone in on the key points at a glance).

My theory (no data, just a theory): Ravens was not chosen innocently. It was chosen on purpose specifically because it has masculine symbolism in our culture. (Death, scavengers, black, aggressive, intelligent, low pitch call). It is part of a political agenda to break gender stereotypes in our culture.

The first strategy is to assign the masculine connotations that ravens have to the formerly-women's role, to send the message that women are not shrinking violets and that strength, aggressiveness, dominance, etc. are as acceptable for women as for men; that many women have these traits and should be admired for them, not criticized shamed, or even silently frowned-upon.

The more subtle agenda is an effort to make men more comfortable dancing the right-hand role. In our culture, (currently), it is more acceptable for women to display masculine traits than it is for men to display feminine traits. Many men don't want to dance the woman's role because it somehow threatens their sense of masculinity – they don't want to “be” the woman, even for 10 minutes, even for “just a dance.” Because of stereotypes in our culture, some men feel (perhaps sub-consciously), that “being” the woman makes them look like a sissy, or pansy, or whatever the current derogatory term is. It just feels uncomfortable; it threatens their sense of self.

I was told by someone else (an advocate for larks and ravens) that they believe that raven was chosen, in part, specifically as an effort to combat this “switching-phobia.” It's an effort to make men more comfortable dancing the right-hand role. Responding to the calls for ravens (i.e., “being” the raven), might feel just a little less threatening to them.

I've been thinking about this a lot, and I think it may be at least one aspect of what's going on --- and the problem is that it's backfiring! Rather than making resistant men more open to dancing the right-hand role, it simply feels manipulative. My question is: why is it so all-fire important to you (gender-fluidity advocates) that everyone dance both roles? Why does everyone have to be like you?

It is one thing to expect (demand) respect for your own choices. It is another to push everyone to be like you. If we were saying that no one should switch roles, that everyone must dance the role that matches their gender presentation, that would be a problem. But that's not what's going on. Everyone acknowledges that anyone can dance either role, and I believe there has been consensus on the FB threads that criticizing, shaming, correcting, etc. is outrageous and if that is happening, then we need to address it.

But the raven agenda goes beyond that. It is an effort to push men who do not want to dance the right-hand role to do so. The problem with this is that it is manipulative and disrespectful of their choice. It carries the message that choosing not to dance the right-hand role is not acceptable; that if you don't like dancing both roles, you must be homophobic, or prejudiced, or something similarly negative. THAT is what feels offensive. The walk doesn't match the talk. The people who are advocating gender-neutral language in the name of respecting everyone's choices are, in fact, disrespecting some people's choices and attempting to change them.

This may sound a bit far-fetched. It's a lot to read into the choice of a word, and as I said, I have no evidence; it's just a theory. But I have personally experienced some (not all) gender-fluid people pushing an agenda that is anti-binary. There is definitely a warrior faction out there that goes far beyond respect and equality for fluidity and pushes for the elimination of binary-ness. This is offensive. It is just as offensive to binary people to be told that their perspective is wrong as it is for

fluid people to be told that their identity is wrong. It's a case of the pendulum swinging too far in the other direction. They have moved passed equality and have gotten into prejudice in the reverse direction.

It is this subtle feeling of manipulation, and having an agenda foisted upon the community, that has made some people defensive and resistant to larks and ravens.

For me, personally, I try to not get offended too easily. I try to give people the benefit of the doubt. So while I believe this agenda may be going on, it's not my primary reason for disliking ravens as a dance role. For me, it's simply that it's confusing. The response to the calls needs to be as automatic as possible. I have observed, in myself and in others, that because ravens have male symbolism in our culture, the auto-response when hearing a call for the Ravens is that it equates to the formerly-men's role, and the L for lark must be L for lady. All of this happens in a split second. It's sub-conscious. This is why I think Robins is a better term. Because it is more neutral, on par with the neutrality of Larks, neither term has any underlying association with either of the roles based on the ingrained gender-based terms, and therefore the only cue that exists is the alliteration of R for right and L for left, and the subconscious, split-second auto-response is, in fact, correct.

Let me add, just for the record, that personally, I support efforts to break stereotypes in our society. As a woman who is pretty assertive, I certainly disagree with stereotypes that being assertive, smart, ambitious, and active is somehow non-feminine. And I believe we still have a lot of work to do regarding mainstream ideas of what it means to "be a man." "Man up." "Boys don't cry." Being caring, nurturing, a good listener, deferential when appropriate, etc., all need to be more accepted as masculine traits.

But social change takes time, and pushing an agenda in a small community like our contra dance world is not the right approach. The warrior crusade is fine for larger society. Fight your fight. Go to protests. Lobby. But this crusader attitude within our dance community is not working. It's just offensive, and it's creating division.

That's why I'm pushing for a conflict-resolution approach. This means both sides have to be open to a solution that would feel ok to everyone. The larks and ravens advocates need to let go of their raven agenda and be open to some other terms (such as robins), that would be gender-neutral (the claimed agenda), without being manipulative (the underlying, unstated agenda). And the traditionalists need to acknowledge that the barriers created by gender-based terms are real for some people, and be open to neutral terms that feel accepting without being burdensome. This is called compromise. No one gets their first choice, but also doesn't have to put up with their least favorite choice. We coalesce around something acceptable, if not ideal, for everyone.