



James Lipton, *An Exaltation of Larks: The Ultimate Edition*.

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This is not a new book, since it was first published in 1968, and was thereafter reprinted quite a number of times, until the "Ultimate Edition" appeared in 1991 (Penguin, 1993)—the edition we are concerned with here. Playwright, lyricist, director, choreographer, and producer, James Lipton, the screenwriter of eight motion pictures and author of a novel entitled *Mirrors*, was himself a published poet by the age of twelve.

This is, I must admit, the most hilarious book I have read in years, at least in the field of linguistics. It is at the same time an invaluable source of authoritative information on how groups of things, animals and persons have been named in the English language over the years and centuries, and a spring of endless intellectual amusement.

This learned compilation is made up of more than 1,100 collective nouns, some resurrected from the ancient Books of Venery, others more recently coined. The older terms were codified in the so-called medieval "Books of Courtesy" and, some time later, in 15th-century semi-official listings, such as *The Egerton Manuscript* (1450), the earliest one, or *The Book of St. Albans* (1450), the most complete and most seminal of the early nomenclatures. "The lyrical, fanciful *exaltation of larks*," the author explains, "has credentials as good as the mundane and universally accepted *school of fish* [originally "shoal of fish"], since both terms offer as provenance the same source", i.e. *The Book of St. Albans* (items 18 and 132, respectively). But it was actually in the "word-hungry, language-mad England" of the 17th century (with Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Marvell, Dryden, the forty-seven "inspired translators" of the King James Bible, etc.) that many of the terms listed in the first part of this volume were born.

A fair amount of these terms, which all deserve an equal claim to our respect, have unfortunately slipped out of the memory and speech habits of English-speaking people, and the purpose of Lipton's book is precisely to try and "redress the balance."

The author defines the thesis of his book in a very simple manner : "When a group of ravens flaps by, you should, if you want to refer to their presence, say: 'There goes an unkindness of ravens.' Anything else would be wrong." But he admits being at a loss when it comes to offering a collective word for these collective terms. Should they be called "nouns of multitude"? Or "company terms"? Or "nouns of assemblage", "collective nouns", "group terms"? Lipton eventually sets his heart on "terms of venery"—if only, he says, because the phrase "smacks more of the field than of the classroom, and, in its adjectival form [venereal], more of Gomorrah than Grammar."

Lipton's book is not just an innocent ramble in the universe of lost English words: "The heart and soul of this book is the concern that our language, one of

our most precious natural resources, is also a dwindling one that deserves at least as much protection as our woodlands, wetlands and whooping cranes."

What Lipton offers the reader, then, is a zoo of words, a "language sanctuary [...] removed safe from the hostile environment of our TV-tabloid world." His main concern is not so much about the quantity of words used as about the area of reality they cover. When words describing nature in its diversity tend to disappear, there is an ecological risk that the reality behind them might not be heeded any more. The author's earnest hope is that at least a few of the terms revived by his book will eventually "stick to our ribs and be ingested into our speech." If so, the important thing is not that we will again be able "to turn to someone and coolly and correctly say, 'Look—a charm of finches'. What is more important is that a charm of poetry will have slipped quietly into our lives."

Part I being the Preface (here called "The Beginning"), Part II contains some of the terms of venery that are *still* part of the language in both Britain and America, such as *a pride of lions*, *a brood of hens*, *a hand of bananas*. For most words, interestingly, the etymology is given. When not available, it is replaced by comments that are both scholarly and entertaining. Part III, "The Unknown", includes terms that are authentic but no longer used today, such as *a dule of doves* (from the French "deuil") or *a stud of mares*, with this comment: "In orthography and meaning, stud has changed little in 500 years. Stud descends via stod from the Old English standan, to stand. To this day, wherever a stallion is available as a sire, he is said to be 'standing', and does, in word and deed, 'stand' over a mare."

Forgetting about the "terms of venery" proper, Part IV, "The Unexpected", offers a listing of "social terms"—such as *a cajolery of taverners*, *a skulk of thieves* or *a pontificality of prelates*—, some of which have given rise to "linguistic free-for-alls that have endured for five hundred years." It is also the privilege of this Ultimate Edition to include some 250 illustrations by the 19th-century French lithographer Granville, whose contributions to *Le Charivari* are still vividly remembered.

Part V, "The Game of Venery, First Move", offers terms of venery that the author himself coined or encountered in the course of his research, or of his life. Some are, indeed, not his, like Kurt Vonnegut's *phalanx of flashers* or George Plimpton's *an om of Buddhists*. As one reads these, one already feels tempted to enter the game. "If you should feel the urge", says Lipton, do not hesitate: "there are more brushes in the bucket."

Part VI, "The Game of Venery, Second Move," takes its stand on an Italian phrase: *Inventi la partita!*, invent the game. And the fact is that ever since its first publication, *An Exaltation of Larks* has become a kind of parlour game "with its rules and sides and winners and losers." This section of the book is therefore a compilation of playful terms found or coined by friends and readers of James Lipton over the last thirty years or so.

Due to the both authoritative and amusing way in which this astonishing book has been compiled, I cannot but warmly recommend it to all students and teachers of English—a community also known in linguistic circles as *an exhilaration of Anglicists*. ■