

Death Witches

Women Reformers in the Death Industry

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Witch. The very word conjures images of green skinned old hags stirring cauldrons of nastiness as they prepare to hex cows, wreak havoc on townspeople, and steal Dorothy's ruby red slippers. While witch used to be a slur used against a person, usually a woman, who was thought to consort with the devil and gain evil favor through sexual acts, feminists are reclaiming the word witch as a proud title signifying that they are radical revolutionaries who are bucking the patriarchy. In this paper, I will examine the history of the word witch, discuss how women are reclaiming witch as a term of female empowerment, and discuss whether women reformers in the death industry can be legitimately compared with other women fighting back against oppression and societal control.

History of the Witch

The history of the word witch is shrouded in mystery as at one time there were multiple words to describe sorcery, divination, and other forms of witchcraft. The term was not always used to denote evil witchery either, there were times it was used to describe beneficial chants and spells. However, by the ninth century, the term had primarily come to mean a practitioner of harmful magic and, by some at least, someone who consorted with the devil to gain evil powers. By the 920s, witchcraft had begun to be criminalized and the penalty for killing someone by witchcraft was death (Hutton, 2018).

While witchcraft was criminalized in the 920s, it wasn't until the late 1400s that witch hunting began in earnest. Spurred by the publication of *Malleus Maleficarum* (Hammer of Witches) by a German Catholic theologian, the Catholic and Protestant churches began hunting and persecuting supposed witches. Although Pope Innocent VIII (1484-1492) was viewed as ineffectual in some areas, he was aggressive against

those he considered “enemies of the faith” (Deyrmenjian, 2020, p. 4) and witches were definitely enemies of the faith. In 1484, Innocent issued the *The Summis desiderantes affectibus*, which gave the author of the *Malleus Maleficarum* the authority to hunt witches. Behaviors attributed to witches included making animals sick, rendering women infertile, and a rejection of the Christian faith (Deyrmenjian, 2020). Witch hunts spread across Europe and it is estimated that between the 14th and 17th centuries, up to 50,000 people were executed as witches in Europe. Up to 80 percent of those executed were women (Gendercide).

Women Called Witches

The *Malleus Maleficarum* called out women as being willing to lie and deceive, having inner malice, and having a low intellectual capacity. These misogynistic writings were supported by misogynistic interpretations of the Bible which maintained that women were inferior to men and therefore more susceptible to the allures of the devil. Women who did not conform to strict gender roles were suspect in the eyes of their neighbors and at risk of being hunted and put on trial for being a witch (Mederos, 2020).

At the time of the European witch hunts, there were few opportunities for women economically, sexual freedom for women was nonexistent, and women who chose to live outside of societal norms were often targeted as witches because the misogynistic belief at the time was that only women who consorted with the devil could live independent lives (Mederos, 2020). America was not immune to witch hunts as 19 people were executed as witches in 17th Century Massachusetts. Similar to their European counterparts, the condemned were mostly women. These women were women who spoke their minds and stated their opinions (Morford, 2019), were women

who did not have children, and women who challenged the patriarchal norms of society around them (Dennis & Reis, 2015).

Thankfully witch hunts in the US and Europe ended in the 17th century, but women who live outside the bounds of the patriarchal society in which we live continue to be called witches. Those who did not want women to win the vote in the early 1900s created ads linking suffragists with witches by invoking themes similar to those that caused women to be burned at the stake in earlier times. They claimed that the suffragettes were too independent, that they were bad mothers, and that they were abandoning their husbands. The misogynistic ads also used hag stereotypes, similar to those of the ugly witch tropes, to paint women who wanted the vote as being unattractive and mannish (Shaffer, 2022).

Even as recently as 1992, women who wanted independent lives were decried as witches. Pat Robertson, the fundamentalist Christian who spoke out adamantly against the Equal Rights Amendment said the “feminist agenda” is about a socialist, anti-family political movement that encourages women to leave their husbands, kill their children, practice witchcraft, destroy capitalism and become lesbians” (Solee, 2020, p. 166). Even though Robertson did not directly advocate violence against women, his words had echoes of the men of days of old who called difficult to control women witches.

Reclaiming Witch as a Term of Feminist Empowerment

Until recently, witch was a derogatory slur. However, just as the words bitch and slut are being reclaimed as terms of female empowerment (Anderlini-D'Onofrio, 2003), the word witch is also being reclaimed. Interestingly, one of the first groups to reclaim the word and images of the witch were the suffragettes. While their opponents focused

on the ugly aspects of witches, the image that appealed to the suffragettes was witches as independent women. This appealed to the women of the times who wanted autonomy over their work lives, their sex lives, their personal lives, and their political lives (Gambino, 2014). Like the women called witches in earlier times, some women of the early 1900s challenged the status quo because they wanted independent lives free of the encumbrances of a husband and children.

Today's third wave feminists are making icons of women once called witches. Fictional women like Lilith, Adam's first wife who refused to submit to him, and real women like Joan of Arc who wore men's clothes and led an army into battle, are being embraced by women today as symbols of power and resistance to the patriarchy (Solee, 2020). Although some who call themselves witch practice a pagan spirituality that worships the earth and believes in magic, other women who call themselves witches do so as a reminder that they are strong and independent women, like the witches of old.

Death Reformers as Witches

In the days before capitalism and the realization by the patriarchy that there was money to be made off of the death of human beings, women were the caretakers of death. Women washed the bodies of the dead, women sang over their souls, and women soothed those left behind. However, once men realized there was money to be made in the business of death, women were told they were too emotionally fragile, not strong enough, and other lies meant to convince them that the caretaking of the dead should be men's business (Runblad, 1995). However, women are working to reform the death industry and are being called radical for doing so.

An Industry Ready for Reform

Until the mid-1800s, death was a family affair as women took care of the corpse, the casket was either hand made or purchased from a local cabinet maker, the body was laid out at home, and family members often dug the grave. There was no need for embalming because people died close to their homes and bodies were buried shortly after death. The Civil War changed the funeral industry forever as young men, both Confederate and Union, were dying in droves on battlefields far from home. Their loved ones wanted to see them before they were buried, but that was impossible without a means of preservation. Embalming provided a way for men who died on the battlefield to be preserved for the long train ride home so their families could see them one last time (Finney, Shulman, & Kheirbek, 2022).

Embalming was the beginning of a sea change in how Americans cared for their dead. Death became an industry and people, mostly men, began opening funeral homes that offered embalming, caskets, and services (Woodvale Cemetery). Over the years, the funeral industry became big business and was, according to some, ready for reformation as funeral directors were gaining a reputation for taking advantage of the grieving.

Jessica Mitford and *The American Way of Death*

Death reformer Jessica Mitford's 1963 book *The American Way of Death* explored all the ways that the funeral industry took advantage of the grieving, often using their own words against them. She quoted funeral industry publications that called for using the deceased loved one's feelings of grief and remorse to upsell them a

more expensive casket (Mitford, 1998, p. 20). For instance, Mitford's book quoted *The National Funeral Service Journal* as saying that a "funeral is not an occasion for cheapness. It is, in fact, an opportunity for the display of a status symbol..." The article went on to say that "A funeral is also an occasion when feelings of guilt and remorse are satisfied to a large extent by the purchase of a fine funeral" (Mitford, 1998, p. 20).

Although these quotes came from a trade magazine and not something that the general public would read, the attitude expressed sets the tone for how funeral professionals interact with grieving families by taking advantage of their grief to upsell them.

Funeral homes also work to profit off embalming, even in instances where the deceased is cremated. Embalming is not required by any state in the United States and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) requires that funeral homes obtain permission to embalm a body if the family is to be charged for the service. However, when Mitford's book was published in 1963, funeral homes were regularly embalming bodies without the families express consent. Mitford quoted an embalming textbook at the time where the author concluded that since embalming was viewed as a customary procedure that unless the family explicitly prohibited, "the act of entrusting the body to the care of the funeral establishment carries with it implied permission to go ahead and embalm" (Mitford, 1998, p. 44).

Funeral directors use sophisticated sales techniques to increase sales and Mitford called them out on it in both her original 1963 book and its 1998 revision. In her original book, Mitford quoted the dean of a school of mortuary science who encouraged funeral directors to put their selling plan into place as soon as they receive a call from the bereaved. This dean also admonishes his students to not have a preconceived

notion of what any family will purchase as “You cannot possibly measure the intensity of their emotions, undisclosed insurance, or funds that may have been set aside for funeral expenses” (Mitford, 1998, p. 21). Although the sales techniques might not have been high pressure, funeral directors were advised to arrange their show rooms to upsell the grieving (Mitford, 1998, p. 21),

After attending a funeral industry conference prior to the re-release of her book in 1998, Mitford wrote about the presentations including one who talked about developing techniques to sell “cremation families” more services, higher end urns, and other memorial pieces (Mitford, 1998, p. 8). Another presenter at the same conference disclosed the marketing techniques they used to get referrals from doctors, lawyers, and the clergy (Mitford, 1998, p. 6).

Mitford’s original book became a best seller and her efforts led to public awareness of the tactic used by the funeral industry to upsell grieving families and led to changes in the laws to provide for more transparency in the funeral industry (Mitford, 1998).

Caitlin Doughty and *Ask a Mortician* and the *Order of the Good Death*

Death reform work continues today with women like Caitlin Doughty advocating through her *Order of the Good Death* and her Ask a Mortician YouTube channel for a death positive world. She, and the others in her order, define being death positive as being willing to speak openly and honestly about death without any taboos. Other tenets of the death positive movement include allowing families to care for their own dead and encouraging methods of disposing of bodies that are environmentally friendly (The Order of the Good Death, n.d.).

Doughty breaks taboos when talking about death on both her YouTube Channel, *Ask a Mortician*, and articles on the *Order of The Good Death* Website. One of the videos on Doughty's *Ask a Mortician* Channel describes the funeral of Rapper Goonew, whose family chose to have his funeral at a club with him propped up and "playing" his guitar. Other video topics include the cannibalism of the Donner party, how severely decomposed bodies are prepared for a viewing, and discussion of corpse wax (Doughty, 2022). The articles on The *Order of the Good Death* site include advice on protecting your right to a green funeral, tattoos as an act of remembrance, and multiple articles about grief (The Order of the Good Death, n.d.). Although many of the articles and videos are titillating and play to human's desire to explore the darkness of death, other material provides valuable information about planning your own death or the death of someone close to you.

Like Mitford, Doughty is no fan of the industrial funeral industry as she points out that the funeral industry takes advantage of people's grief to sell more expensive caskets and services, but unlike Mitford she advocates for families to be more personally involved in taking care of their loved one's bodies. Some of the most poignant moments in the book are where she describes scenes of families last moments with their loved one before cremation. One family flew from the Southern Hemisphere to witness the cremation of their mother and before she was cremated, they spent time with her body, surrounded her with incense, and placed an ice cream bar in her hands (Doughty, 2015, p. 182). Another family gathered to spend time with their loved one before the crematory crew came to take her away and then watched as Doughty and her coworker took her body out of the house (Doughty, 2015, pp. 41-42).

Although burials and cremations are the most typical ways to dispose of a body in the United States, there are alternatives. These include a green burial where a body is wrapped in a shroud and buried. A green burial eliminates the need for a casket and the pollutants, such as embalming fluid and concrete, that are buried with the body (Order of the Good Death, 2012). Another more environmentally friendly form of body disposal is aquamation where the body is broken down and liquified. Doughty has written and produced several podcasts on aquamation and she and her followers successfully lobbied for aquamation to be legal in several states (Doughty, How One Man Kept Water Cremation Illegal, 2022). Although Doughty's podcasts may be irreverent, they provide valuable information and they do help demystify death.

Are They Witches?

There are several characteristics that women were called witches and those who have reclaimed the title have in common. Witches are independent. Witches are radical. Witches challenge mainstream, usually patriarchal, opinions. And witches face derision from the establishment. In this section, I will evaluate whether Mitford and Doughty possess the above characteristics.

Independence

Independence is a quality that both Mitford and Doughty share. In her book, *The American Way of Death*, Mitford did her own research about the funeral industry and did not just accept the status quo. For instance, she took the time to research the laws surrounding the funeral industry and did not just accept the word of funeral professionals. After being told by three funeral professionals that it was illegal for an uncoffined body to be cremated, she read the relevant state law and talked to an officer

with the Board of Health that told her there was no law in California requiring a coffin be used when a body is cremated (Mitford, 1998, p. 28).

Doughty is also an independent thinker who does her own research when challenging the funeral industry. She writes in *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* about funeral homes who tell families that the law states that they need to call the funeral home immediately after death to pick up the body, even if there is no such law. This happened to her own family when her grandmother died and Doughty's mother was told that keeping the body at home longer than two hours was against Hawaii state law, even though it wasn't. She also recalled the rage she felt when the funeral director embalmed her grandmother's body against the family's wishes and then asked if her grandmother's preparation was to her liking. Instead of demurely agreeing and saying yes, like some of us would have, Doughty screamed no and covered her grandmother's body with a sheet (Doughty, 2015, pp. 230-234).

Radical

Radical is another word that describes both Mitford and Doughty as both have advocated for changes that are outside the main stream. At the time that Mitford wrote *An American Way of Death*, most Americans believed that they had little choice in funeral arrangements. They believed, based on propaganda from the funeral industry that they should follow the advice of the so-called experts in the industry. However, Mitford's book shed light on the somewhat shady policies of the funeral industry and the public responded by making her book a best seller (Mitford, 1998). Mitford's book was also radical as it described the embalming process in full detail. This passage was

nearly pulled from the book by her publishers, but it was ultimately published and excerpted in other publications (Mitford, 1998).

To some the way that Doughty lives her life could be considered radically. After college, Doughty decided to pursue a career in the funeral industry. Her first job was as a crematory operator, which was not a job that many expected a young woman to pursue. She writes passionately and graphically about what happens when bodies decay and when they are cremated (Doughty, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, 2015). Through her podcasts and the *Order of the Good Death* she also publicly discusses topics that many find distasteful including preparing severely decomposed bodies for burial, corpse wax, and real live vampires (Doughty, *Ask a Mortician*, 2022).

Challenging the Patriarchy

From the time the funeral industry professionalized, it has been primarily been run by men as women were deemed too delicate to work with death (Runblad, 1995). Currently only 16% of the members of the National Funeral Directors' Association are female, which is up from 10% in 2004 (National Funeral Directors Association, 2021). The Funeral Industry is also split long racial lines with White funeral homes taking care of White bodies and Black funeral homes taking care of Black bodies. However, one key difference is that Black funeral homes have been more welcoming to women on their staff. For the purposes of this discussion, I will evaluate whether or not Mitford and Doughty challenged the patriarchal White funeral industry.

Mitford definitely challenged the status quo of the funeral industry and she makes it clear in her books that she considers the funeral industry a male field as she repeatedly refers to funeral professionals as “funeral men” (Mitford, 1998). Doughty

also makes it clear that the funeral industry is primarily male dominated as an article on *The Order of the Good Death* states, “There is a traditional image of a funeral director as a white guy in a black suit” (Reilly, 2020). Doughty also wrote about the difficulties of getting a job in the funeral industry as hiring managers clearly preferred male candidates (Doughty, 2015, p. 209).

Facing Derision

The last measure of whether or not death reformers Mitford and Doughty can be considered witches is perhaps the most critical test. If men were not threatened by women’s activities, they would most likely ignore them. However, the patriarchy attacks like a wounded animal when threatened and the vitriol directed at both Mitford and Doughty speaks volumes about how threatened the patriarchal funeral industry feels by their activities. After her book was originally released, Mitford was called a cancer, a communist, and anti-American. Her critics also falsely claimed that she was attacking Christianity, even though both Protestant and Catholic clergy had supported her book (Mitford, 1998, pp. 44-45). Doughty has been similarly attacked for her work as she noted in *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*. She said, “Tucked away in the comment section of my kitschy web series “Ask a Mortician,” there are enough misogynistic comments to last a lifetime” (Doughty, 2015, p. 216).

Conclusion

There are clearly similarities between feminists who call themselves witches and death reformers. I believe that a further examination would find that there are also similarities between other women associated with death and witches. For instance, women who worship Santa Muerte are clearly independent as they operate outside of

bounds of the patriarchal Catholic church, they challenge the status quo, and are often derided for their beliefs. Activists who speak out for missing family members and others also operate outside the bounds of the patriarchy and challenge the status quo. However, the one question that is difficult to answer in this analysis is how female death reformers and others in the death industry would feel about being called witches. Although there are feminists who proudly claim the word, it may be the death reformers view the word as an insult and calling someone a witch if they do not claim the title, could be considered a slur

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