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SOMETIMES A PRINCESS HAS TO DIE

A excerpt from I.A. Watson's anthology **Women of Myth**

1. SACRIFICE

Sometimes a princess has to die.

A princess doesn't belong to herself, but to her people. To her country. Her body, her children, her life, even her death don't belong to her. I've been taught that since I could first understand words and I paid special attention to it. After all, I am a princess.

I'm Hesione of Troy, King Laomedon's daughter, granddaughter of Ilus who carved out the empire of Ilium, great-granddaughter of Tros who founded the realm of Troad, great-great-granddaughter of Dardanus who was fathered upon Princess Electra by Zeus himself. I am born of kings, of queens, and of a god.

I don't say this to boast but rather to illustrate my exact value. A princess is a national asset. A princess can win a realm by marriage as surely as a prince can win one by conquest. A king's daughter speaks with gods and goddesses in ways that a king's son never can. And when some precious, irreplaceable sacrifice must be made, what may be yielded up of greater value than a princess of the blood?

I didn't find out that I had to die until my fourteenth birthday, of course. In Troy it is on the fourteenth anniversary of her birth that a girl of quality becomes a woman. We are led with solemn ceremony into the temple of Virgin Athena, to offer prayers and make sacrifices to her that we might leave our maiden estate and take a husband. From thence we go to the temple of Aphrodite, and what petitions we make there are purely private.

Except... the custom has changed of late. There's another stop on the procession at Poseidon's compound. That's a good place to start

my story, where my old nurse Chryse¹ led me down the rough stone steps to the shrine above the fish pool.

“Stand straight and still,” she instructed me for the fiftieth time. “Make no move to draw the eye to you, nothing to make the sacred animals notice you at all.”

“I know.”

“I mean it, Hese. Don’t even breathe if you can help it. I don’t trust those fish priests. They’re holding a grudge against your father, and if they work out who you are...”

“I *know*, Chryse.”

“They probably train those fish. Or use magic to control them. If they can tell which girl is Laomedon’s daughter they’re bound to pick you.”

I sighed. “I almost wish they would. At least then father would have to give in and stop this ridiculous lottery.”

“Don’t you dare say that!” Chryse scolded. She forgets I’m not seven now. “Don’t you *dare* let them guess. It would put your father into an impossible situation, impossible ethically and politically.”

“I know. I was only thinking out loud.”

“Don’t think. Don’t do anything. Just stand completely still and will those fish to swim somewhere else.”

I admit I was a bit nervous as I went down into the bowl and was shepherded into the temple by the priestesses. All of Poseidon’s servants cultivate that strange googly-eyed stare, and I think their religion must prevent them from washing their hair as well.

“This way, this way!” the high priestess commanded briskly. Well, it was Kymaphra’s moment of power, so I suppose she had to make the most of it.

¹ Chryse, meaning “golden”, was a popular name in Greek myth. No less than five different women appear in the literature. The most significant to Troy and likely the reason it was a popular choice there was the Chryse who was first wife of Dardanus, founder of the house of Trojan royalty. Hesione’s nurse in our current narrative is Chryse Tropha; Tropha means “nurse” or “nanny”.

It was dark in the shrine. The only light came from hooded torches that shone down into little bowls of water, casting reflective ripples up over the statue of Poseidon himself. In most of his temples he was carved with a trident and a net to show his mastery over the sea. At Ilium he's depicted with a great hammer and a block of stone, in memory of his building the walls that protect Troy against all attack.

"Remove all of your earthy possessions!" the priestess commanded, and sixteen nervous maidens pulled off their jewellery and stepped out of their chitons to stand naked before the god.

Kymaphra let us wait like that for a moment. She probably enjoyed it, and it helped to reinforce who was in charge here and how helpless we were.

But here's something else I know: a princess is a princess with or without her fine raiment. In fact a princess without raiment can be *very* powerful indeed. So I didn't cower or try to cover myself like the others. What was the point?

Kymaphra spotted my defiance, of course. "At the founding of Troy," she said, lecturing everybody but staring directly at me, "Almighty Zeus commanded Lord Poseidon and Apollo of the Nine Songs to protect the land of his son Dardanus by building a wall, a marvellous wall around the city that Dardanus had founded. Poseidon laboured for King Tros and so the great fortifications were raised."

I bit my tongue. Poseidon and Apollo were sentenced with the labouring job of protecting Troy to shame them, as a punishment for rebelling against Zeus and losing; but the priestess was missing that bit out.

"In payment for this mighty labour, for building of a wall that could never be destroyed, the King of Troy agreed to make tribute offering to Poseidon at his temple in Lyrnessus. Each year thereafter our ruler would offer a proper sum of gold, in acknowledgement of the god's great gift."

Here it comes, I thought.

“And so it was until the modern day,” the high priestess persisted. “Until our current ruler, Laomedon, chose to cheat the god and renege upon the contract.”

That was enough. “Wasn’t there a contractual breach when an earthquake caused part of the wall to fall down?” I interrupted. “And isn’t Poseidon supposed to be god of earthquakes? If he wasn’t keeping his end of the bargain...”

“Be silent!” Kymaphra shrieked, flushing red. I guess she wasn’t used to being corrected in her own house. “Laomedon’s greed is infamous. His own excesses brought the gods’ disfavour, which is why the wall fell. Rather than make reparation, rather than make great and humble sacrifice for his sins, he chose instead to cast away the god’s support by denying Poseidon his rightful sacrifice!”

I shrugged and tried to look bored. In truth I wasn’t very easy with my father’s decision about the temple tribute. There’s a weakness in our family, in that we must always have whatsoever we covet. In King Laomedon’s case that was wealth.

“And so we suffer now under Poseidon’s wrath,” Kymaphra hissed. “The gods are not to be trifled with.”

“I know,” I answered again. I was getting a bit tired of all this. “I’m of Zeus’ bloodline.”

That shut her up for a bit. There’s really no answer to that, when you think about it. My four-times granddad can beat up your sea god any time he wants to.

“Poseidon’s wrath is terrible,” the high priestess persisted at last. “The oceans boil and churn. Great waves wash across the land, stripping the soil, bringing hunger and death. The nation falters.”

Well that much was true. We’d had a succession of bad harvests and high annual floods. Bad weather at sea was hitting the fishing fleets hard. Coastal storms had devastated many shoreline settlements. There had been more earth tremors after the one that had damaged our western curtain wall. Later came famine and disease – and reports of a chthonic sea-horror rampaging by night, destroying lives and property.

When that happens you can see why hungry frightened people might start to wonder whether the king could have been a bit politer to the gods. There had been riots, with some fatalities in quenching them.

“The oracles have decreed that Laomedon must make restitution for the wages he withheld from Lord Poseidon – but he has refused.”

That bit was true as well. Father had sent for guidance to the seer at the temple of Zeus Ammon in distant Egypt and to the Pythoness’ Delphic Shrine. He hadn’t liked the answers he got back. There’s an old tradition: when the land fails and harvests are poor then sprinkling a king’s blood over the fields is a good way to solve the problem. Father wasn’t at all keen to see the custom revived, though. It was a hard choice between his purse and his life.

“Now Lord Poseidon sends the most terrible of his sea creatures, monstrous Ketos, to ravage land and sea until justice is done. Only terrible and holy sacrifice can stay its wrath.”

Kymaphra was on less solid ground here, in my opinion. Certainly there’d been plenty of trouble since father had refused tribute to Poseidon. But Laomedon had his reasons to deny payment. He’d never liked sending that much money to a rival city’s shrine, and repairs to the wall after the earthquake had been extremely costly. And then that winter after his refusal some of his precious horses had turned up carved to pieces.

Now you have to understand about those horses. They mean a lot to father. Before I was even born, my oldest brother Ganymede vanished.² Some said he’d been kidnapped by pirates, others that he’d been slaughtered by wild animals. The oracles said he’d been taken by Zeus, who loved him, to be his page boy in Olympus. They promised that the king of the gods would compensate my father for his loss. It’s true that a short time later Laomedon acquired his fabulous white

² Some authorities make Ganymede the younger brother of King Laomedon, which would make the vanished youth Hesione’s uncle.

horses by a curious happenstance. Ever afterwards father considered them to be Zeus' exchange for Ganymede.

The Trojan Whites are fast and strong, brave as lions, excellent war-horses for pulling battle chariots. Father hordes the stock jealously and he's the envy of the nations. So when some of the herd turned up torn to pieces by wild beasts, Laomedon took it all very personally.

My little brother Podarches once speculated that it was the priests who really slashed the horses. But Podarches has always been suspicious.

Things got worse. People started talking about a sea monster. People started talking about human sacrifices to placate the beast. People started looking at the royal family with a calculating eye.

"It's not as if they couldn't spare one." That's what Chryse whispered to me was being muttered in the forum.

But father was unlikely to go under the fish-priest's knife himself, and none of his generation was about to volunteer. My brothers were ruled out pretty quickly too. Princesses are valuable, but warlike sons who can be trusted to general armies without turning them on the king of Troy are more precious still. Bucoleon, Laomedon's oldest after poor Ganymede, is only allowed raiding parties since he's a bastard, but Tithonus did pretty well before he was 'carried away by Eos, goddess of the dawn',³ whatever that's a religious euphemism for. Hicateon and Thymoetes go out smiting things for Ilium now, and both of them were smart enough to stay well clear of the city when there was talk of royal sacrifices. Machandreios and Megaboaoon weren't that clever, but they both felt they could spare a sister or cousin anyhow, with Patritimaon so obsessed with his own coming-of-age manhood rites that he didn't really care about anything else

³ The *Homeric Hymn* to Aphrodite describes Eos' kidnapping of handsome Tithonus to be her lover. She petitioned Zeus to make him immortal and was granted her request; but she forgot to also ask that he be unaging, condemning Tithonus to an eternity of senility.

anyhow. Clytius and Podarches aren't old enough to go fighting yet, but father likes to plan ahead.

On the princess menu, there were my half-sisters born of the Scamander river nymph Stramo - jewellery-loving Astyiche,⁴ pyromaniac Aethilla,⁵ and timid Medisicaste. There's little Cilla, sired on Placia the daughter of Otreus. There's Clytodora, who's only a baby.

And then there's Laomedon's heiress by his proper wife, the late Queen Leucippe.⁶ A princess known across Ilium as beautiful, talented, virtuous, and nubile. The natural candidate to shut Poseidon up.

And yes, that's me.

Laomedon didn't like to give up anything of value, though, and he had other plans for me to secure an eastern alliance, I think. He argued that *all* the noble houses should put their daughters up as candidates and let the gods choose by lot. Lord Phoenodarnas, one of the richest men in Troy and father of three eligible girls, made a big speech against it in the forum that whipped up the people to object, but in the end Laomedon – and his standing army – won the argument.

Kymaphra went on for quite some time about King Laomedon's shortcomings. I suppose in her watery temple basement, surrounded by her acolytes, she felt she could vent her spleen. She ranted on too long, though. By the time she'd gone into so much detail about my

⁴ Much later, Astyche was bribed with the glorious amulet of Harmonia to convince her husband (or in some versions her son) to fight in the Trojan War against his better judgement. He died.

⁵ After the Trojan War, Aethilla, Astyoche, and Medisicaste were taken as prizes by Protesilaus (in the versions where he was not the first man to die in the war), but when his fleet put in for water at Thrace the sisters burned the ships. Stranded on a foreign shore, Protesilaus and his men never got home, but instead founded the town of Scione.

⁶ This name actually means "white horse".

father prizing his horses and his money above the welfare of his people or the future of his nation she'd lost her audience. The girls she had intimidated at the opening were starting to get bored.

That's no way to assert authority.

The high priestess must have realised it eventually too. She gathered herself up with dignity and indicated the holy brine pool. "You will compose your minds with piety and step into the water," she instructed her candidates. "When our ceremonies are complete, the sea god's sacred fish will be released amongst you. She whom ground-shaking Poseidon demands as compensation for the insult done to him will be indicated by the attention of his creatures. The rest of you will go on, to the temple of Hera, goddess of marriages, to pray for good matches, and may wed with the blessings and goodwill of the master of the waves."

We were marched down shallow steps into the tepid salt water. The bottom of the pool was covered with white sand. Our feet kicked up clouds of it so we were wading amidst murk in the dim lustral-light of Poseidon's cellar.

They positioned us in a semicircle at the far end of the bath, sixteen girls on the brink of womanhood. Fifteen of us would get there. Kymaphra began a series of hymns leading up to slaughtering a lamb. It seemed to me a redundancy to sacrifice to see who should be sacrificed, but I'm not an expert. I sneaked a look at my sister candidates for becoming Ketos-fodder.

They were a mixed bunch. All freeborn and well-born, of course, since slaves and plebeians were exempt from the lottery. Nothing but the best for Lord Poseidon's monster. Some girls were lath-thin or ugly, some slouched, more than a few snivelled or trembled; but there were amongst them those who stood straight and controlled their fear, and some whose good looks would help them to noble husbands or lovers. At first I felt contempt for those who cowered, but then I was ashamed of myself; it was not their fault that they had been taught terror. Instead I gave them my pity.

It occurred to me that we sixteen were the new women of Ilium. Each month, when the moon was full and heavy, a fresh batch of well-born girls came to Troy, to the temple courts, to leave behind childhood and take their place in the world. Each month now one girl was harvested from the rest, tithed to placate an angry sea-god who showed little sign of being placated. I did a calculation of how many months had passed since father first decreed the sacrifice. I shuddered.

On Poseidon's altar the newborn lamb died. Its blood ran down the stone into channels that sluiced into the sacred pool where we stood. Charming.

The girl beside me was weeping quietly. She wasn't blubbing out loud like a couple of the candidates, but tears trickled down her cheeks to add to the brine of the waters where we stood.

"Hey, don't cry," I whispered to her. "The odds of surviving this are better than going to child-bed."

She sniffed and managed a half-laugh. "Is that meant to make me feel better?"

"Why not? Birthing's more dangerous, but I'm reliably informed the ceremony nine months before that gets you there is a lot more fun than listening to Wave Foam."⁷

Another snort. She was scandalised and amused, which was better than frightened and crying.

"I wish I was brave like you," she told me in secret undertones. "I just don't want to be eaten by a sea monster."

"*If* that's what happens." I replied. "My brother speculates whether that's *really* how the girls who get chained out there meet their end. Or does some Poseidon priest come along dressed in his fish costume and finish them with his knife?"

My neighbour quivered. "How is that better?"

"You could kick the fish priest in the balls before he gets you. Assuming he has any."

⁷ The literal translation of Kymaphra.

“Do you really think there’s no Ketos? Only they say the creature is the Kraken reborn, tearing up ships and smashing whole fishing villages. Or a giant monstrous whale that nothing can overpower. Or some tentacled horror risen from the sea-bed after aeons of slumber.”

I shrugged. “Well, one lucky winner’s about to find out.”

I wasn’t really as nonchalant as I sounded, but I was trying to set an example. The girls nearest to me heard and stood straighter and calmer. We might not be able to overcome Ketos, but beating Kymaphra was an entirely different matter.

“I’m Theaneira,” the candidate beside me introduced herself. “I... I want someone to remember me if I get picked. I’m Theaneira, daughter of Cissaus – not the famous Cissaus, just the one with the weaving business by the Scamander Gate.”

“If you are picked, I’ll remember you,” I promised. “I will always remember you.”

The girl on the other side of weaver’s daughter leaned forward to complain. “We shouldn’t have to be here at all! My father Phoenodarnas says that if Tros had paid the gods their thirty drachmas⁸ in the first place and if Laomedon had tithed the cattle and gold due to the temples then this could have all been avoided.”

So this was one of the rich lord’s three beautiful daughters, for whom he’d provoked a riot and nearly overthrown the House of Dardanus. Aegesta was the oldest of the sisters and had inherited her father’s tongue. “If only Laomedon would go to the priests’ knives as a proper king should then we wouldn’t have to suffer this. Or if he sent his daughter. It’s a scandal and a shame on the house of Dardanus that not one of them is willing to do what’s right and proper!”

⁸ Thirty drachmas was a day-labourer’s wage, referring to the tradition that Poseidon and Apollo came disguised as humble artisans requiring only humble salaries. The point of the story was that the then-king of Troy cheated his workmen out of even this paltry sum. The annual temple tribute offered in compensation thereafter was significantly more.

“*Is that what’s right?*” I wondered. “I know the Oracle said so, but the Pythoness serves Apollo and he’s one of the supposed injured parties. Poseidon can send floods and quakes, but disease is in the sun-god’s domain. His prophetess can hardly be seen as impartial, can she?”

“The prophet of Zeus Ammon proclaimed it as well, and nobody can argue with Zeus First and Best.”

“I think I could.”

We had to fall silent then, as the votaries waded into the pool with us to give each of us a blessing. That involved pouring a shell of sea-water over us, so our hair would need a good wash and comb to get the salt out later. Then we each got anointed with oil that I strongly suspect was fish paste.

Ah. That’s how the priestesses do it, I reflected. Any one of the jars they used could have had some different substance that attracted fish. So much for random lotteries. Although I suppose they *might* have been honest. There has to be a first time.

“Great Poseidon!” Kymaphra cried out theatrically. “Earth-shaker! Horse-tamer! He who alone raised the mighty walls of Troy!”

Even now the high priestess couldn’t resist a bit of theological politicking. My father’s refusal to send the annual fee to the temples of Poseidon and Apollo had temporarily suspended the long-running feud between the priesthoods over how that fee should get divided. The Apollonians held that since both gods had laboured equally they should each get a half-share. The fish priests maintain that Poseidon had done all the work by himself, while Apollo’s duty had been to watch Troy’s flocks as a shepherd; and therefore a much reduced fee was due him.

Grandmother once whispered to my mother that it was all to do with Greek religious quarrels at the time. Back in those days, when worship of Zeus was becoming pre-eminent, there was a huge and bloody dispute about precedence between the colleges of Zeus, Poseidon, and Apollo. The priests of the Thunderer triumphed, establishing him as First and Best, and consolidated their victory by

setting the high priests of Poseidon and Apollo to penance on behalf of their gods – which means that our famous walls were built by exiled cultists acting out the part rather than divine beings themselves.

For that matter, mother mentioned there was a third builder, the fellow who brokered the truce between the gods and came along to keep the peace. He was a mortal king of Aegina, a little island in the Saronic Gulf, although he was a son of Zeus by the nymph Aegina for whom his kingdom was named. They called him Aeacus, and he doesn't get mentioned by either the Poseidonians or Apollonians when this argument flares up.

All of which goes to show why priests don't approve of princesses being too well educated, and why princesses should be.

Kymaphra really loved the sound of her own voice, or perhaps thought Poseidon did. Her husband was Theagadus, High Priest of Poseidon in Ilium. I wondered whether she thought herself Amphitrite⁹ when they coupled together. Kymaphra was a few years past being a nymph. I tried to put speculation about fishy-flopping Poseidonic bed-rituals out of my mind. Ugh!

"...let divine Poseidon show us now the sacrifice he deserves!" Kymaphra finished at last. It was almost a relief when they raised the gate and let out the minnows.

Almost. Because I knew as soon as the High Priestess first looked at me that I had been recognised as Chryse had feared, and that those prophetic piscines were going to make a straight line for King Laomedon's daughter at last.

And they did.

"Oh!" gasped Theaneira, first in relief that the shoal was not surrounding her as it had momentarily seemed it would, and then in horror as she saw the fishes swimming around me.

"Poseidon has spoken!" boomed Kymaphra. "Who are you, child? Name yourself!"

⁹ Poseidon's divine consort.

“Does it matter who I am?” I asked, determined to be difficult. “The fishies know. That’s enough.”

“You can’t speak to the high priestess like that?” outspoken Aegesta hissed at me warningly.

“Why? Will they sacrifice me more?” I scoffed. I raised my arms and called out, “I am Hesione, King Laomedon’s daughter, Princess of Troy. If someone has to die to save our nation then I will do it – but it had better work!”

I don’t know about princesses in general, but I do love to get a reaction. I suspect it’s a common royal failing. Kymaphra and her minions might not have been surprised, but fifteen pubescent girls were. Theaneira’s outspoken neighbour trembled as if I was Ketos. The weaver’s daughter had the good sense to dip me a little bow and say nothing.

The High Priestess made a gesture of blessing at the other girls. “You may now depart. Be women in the sea-god’s name.”

The former candidates hastened to slosh out of the pool with none of the ceremony of their entering it. They hurried back to their discarded clothes and pulled them on, as if fearing Kymaphra might call for a recount. Only Theaneira stayed where she was.

“You can go,” the priestess told her.

The weaver’s daughter glanced at me. “I’ll stay,” she offered. “I think... the princess needs someone to attend her.” She glanced at me, then added hastily, “Just for now. Not when you chain her to Ketos’ rock.”

“I accept your service, Theaneira, daughter of Cissaus,” I told her, before Kymaphra could eject her. I strode out of the water, wrang out my hair, and looked expectantly at the priestesses. “What now?”

“You will remain with us in the temple court, for instruction,” Kymaphra proclaimed. She meant that I should stay under watch so that my father couldn’t spirit me away where the priesthood couldn’t get me. “At the moon’s dark two weeks from now you will become Poseidon’s bride.”

“Does he have to chain up all his women?” I asked caustically.

“You will learn humility and servitude.”

“I doubt it. If that’s what the sea-god wants he should have picked differently.” I returned to my pile of clothes and jewels but didn’t bother dressing. I reached down, picked up my royal silver tiara, and put it on. For emphasis. “Here’s what you must do now, Kymaphra. Send word to the palace about what has happened. Ask – don’t try to tell – ask my father to come and consult with you. I shall be present. Together we shall agree a way forward that does not involve rioting in the streets of Troy, giant monsters stomping villages, or temples of Poseidon being burned to the ground while priests and priestesses are crucified. That sounds like the prudent course, wouldn’t you say?”

“Yes,” replied the High Priestess through clenched teeth.

“Let’s do that, then,” I told her. “You may proceed.”

Continued in **Women of Myth**

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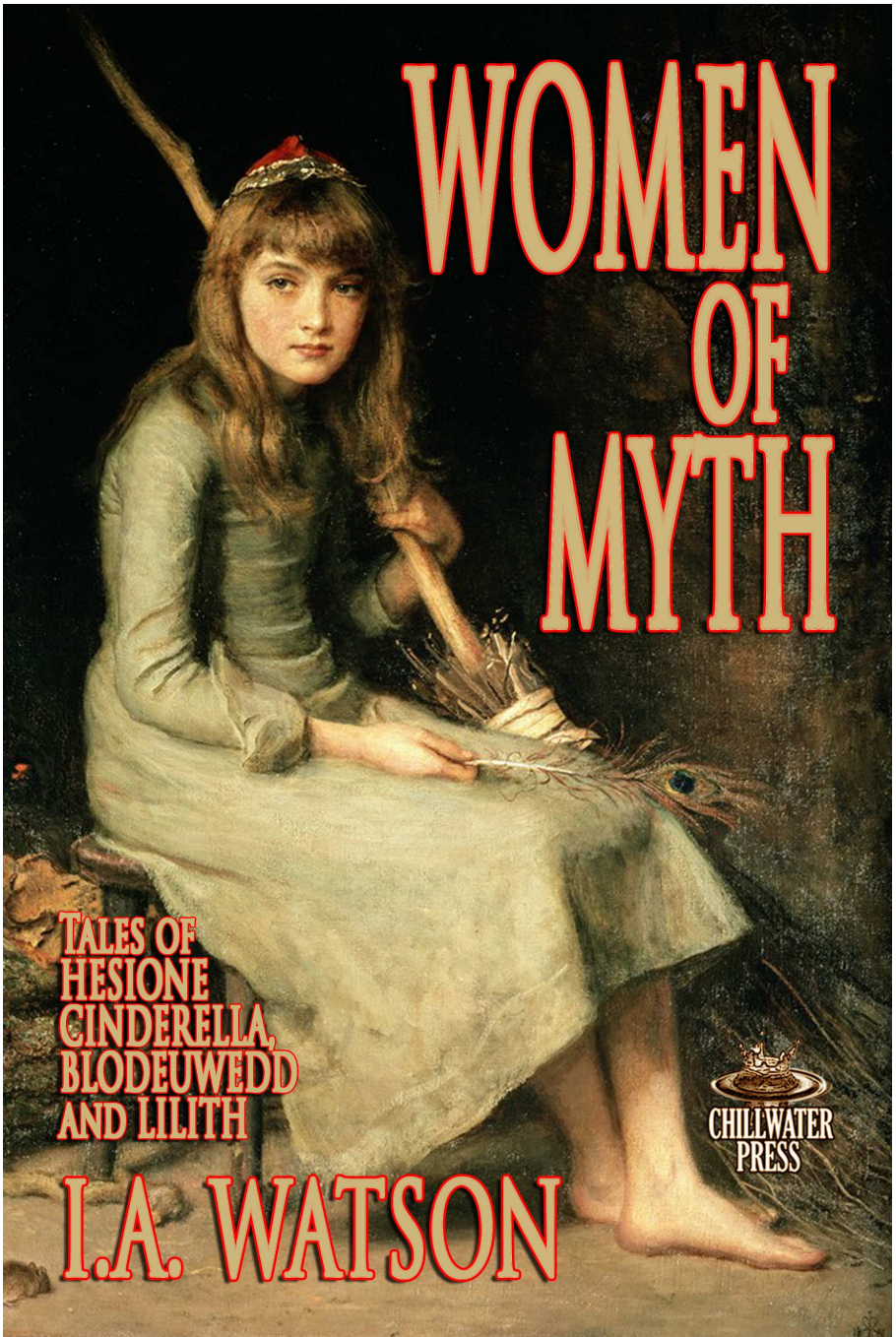
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