In recent years, the concept of Greek myth has been challenged. In *The Creation of Mythology*, Marcel Detienne pointed to the non-existence of any ancient Greek terminology for ‘myth,’ ‘legend,’ etc. and, in particular, to the absence of any collective expression for what we call ‘Greek myth,’ i.e., a related set of stories about gods and heroes. In anthropological terms, it was not, he and others have inferred, a ‘native category.’ According to Detienne, Greek myth was invented in the modern period, beginning in the eighteenth century, and retrojected onto Greek antiquity. It might, then, be naïve to undertake a chapter on myth in Homer, on Homer’s relation to the supposed category of Greek myth, unless one first gives this category some credibility.

In establishing the category of myth, one has to begin by conceding that the vocabulary of ancient Greek is impoverished in this area. *Mythos*, the word that ought to be the most useful, is disappointing. Whatever it means, it never in the archaic and classical periods refers to a category of stories corresponding to ‘myth’ as in our expression ‘Greek myth.’ And yet already in Homer, there is a use of *mythos* that points to a foundation for ‘myth’ and for ‘Greek myth.’ In his study of the speeches in Homer, *The Language of Heroes* (1989), Richard Martin showed that those called *muthoi* consist of three types: commands, boast-and-insult contests (‘flying’), and recitation of remembered events. On the basis of speech-act theory and comparative ethnological evidence, he described these *muthoi* as ‘performances of self’; further, he argued that they must be imitations of styles of speaking actually practiced by those who listened to the poems. Because the stories of remembered events are what we would call

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1 I am grateful to Susan Edmunds, Richard P. Martin, Nancy Worman, and Barry Powell for comments on this chapter.

‘myths,’ we can say that for Homer and his audience, our ‘myth’ is the oral performance of a story with intent to sway an audience.

From this point of view, it seems that the question of Greek myth has been wrongly posed by Detienne and others. Instead of assuming that, if there was Greek myth in antiquity, it would have been Greek myth as defined in the modern period, one should ask if the modern concepts were the right ones in the first place. Could some other concept be formulated that would in fact correspond to an ancient ‘native category’? The category, as Martin’s findings suggest, is oral storytelling. In other words, myth can be understood in terms of a practice, not a subject-matter, and it is unnecessary to look for some ancient concept and/or term meaning ‘story about gods or heroes.’ There is in fact a fairly consistent set of terms that refers to this practice. So, on this hypothesis, the question that should be addressed to the ancient Greek evidence is not ‘Did the Greeks have a category of, or a terminology for, myth?’ but ‘Did the Greeks have a practice of oral storytelling and was this practice accorded any particular status?’ Homer’s epic already provides clear answers to these new questions.

Both the Iliad and the Odyssey contain numerous representations of oral storytelling. In the Iliad, Nestor tells how he fought against the Centaurs (1.260–73; cf. 2.740–43), against Augeas, the Eleans, and the Moliones; and how he competed in the funeral games for Amaryngceus (11.670–762; 23.629–43). Phoenix tells the story of the anger of Meleager (9.524–605); Achilles tells the story of Niobe (24.599–620); Agamemnon tells about Atē’s influence on Zeus at the time of the birth of Heracles (19.91–133). These are not stories that Homer tells in his

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4 Cf. Hansen (1983), making more or less the same observation that Calame (n. 1 above) has recently made (‘The Greeks did not abstract from all these kinds of traditional narratives a general concept of traditional oral story’), concludes that it is time for ‘Hellenists . . . to operate with one inclusive category of the oral story, whether we wish to call it mythology or something else, and however we may wish to divide it up into genres’ (108). My contribution to this volume, pursuing myth in Homer from this oral perspective, begs the notoriously difficult question of the transition from the oral to the written. On this question see Buxton (1994) 45–52 (‘Performance into text’).

5 Cf. the muthoi that Nestor and Machaon are said to tell one another (not reported by Homer). N.b. enepontes ‘narrating’ (Iliad 11.643), which describes how they told muthoi, and, for the semantics of this verb, see Risch (1985).