

# **WHAT IS MYTH?**

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## Oxford English Dictionary 1a:

“traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon.”

## What is Myth: A Taxonomy

- Myth: “a traditional story with collective importance,” in which divine characters are of central importance.
- Legend: “stories of the great deeds of human heroes or heroines.”
- Folklore: “stories whose actors are ordinary people or animals” and they are usually entertaining and sometimes quite bawdy.

## What was “Myth” to the Greeks?

- Myth comes from the Greek word *mythos* (μῦθος)
  - Originally *mythos* was just something said, a speech, neither necessarily true or false.
- Eventually *mythos* became paired opposite *logos*.
  - *Mythos* became stories whose veracity could not be verified. Often that meant narratives in verse.
  - *Logos* referred to rational accounts or discourse.
- While myth is untrue, or rather it is unverifiable, it is not a “lie” in the conventional sense. It exists on a spectrum of truth.

## What is Greek Mythology?

- A mythology is the collection/totality of various myths within a particular cultural tradition.
- Mythology is an *intertext*, or a network of stories.
  - The meaning/significance of each myth can only be appreciated by how it is positioned in relation to this totality of stories.
- NB: There is no definitive version of any myth. They are constantly evolving and changing.
  - Myths are dynamic things, changing to fit different times while holding to a basic narrative.

## **A Working Definition of Greek Mythology:**

A network of symbolically laden and culturally important stories about the gods and semi-divine or otherwise extraordinary mortals from a bygone age that helps to explain the present world.

## So, What is Myth?

- It is everything I've just said and also the following:
- A myth is not just a story. It is far more significant than that.
- Myth is a fluid, dynamic thing.
- Myth is a tool: a way for people and cultures to grapple with larger issues and their place within the world.
  - Typically, myth is the story of the lost and powerful past that has helped to create the present.
- It is part of the cultural heritage and inheritance of a people.
- Myth is part of religious life but it exists beyond it.