PART THREE

HESIOD VERSUS HOMER
CHAPTER SEVEN

INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEST OF HESIOD AND HOMER

0. Introduction

This chapter forms the introduction to the final Part of the book, dealing with the opposition of Hesiod and Homer in the Greek imagination. In the following two chapters (8 and 9), we will explore the main areas in which Hesiod and Homer were employed to illustrate and represent opposing views and values. By way of introduction, this chapter will focus on a traditional story that in a most explicit way presents the two poets as opposites, i.e. as actual opponents in a legendary singing ἀγών or ‘contest’.

In the first section, we will hark back to chapter 1 and discuss the valuable concepts of assimilation (lumping) and differentiation (splitting) again. Naturally, we will now be mostly concerned with the second one (splitting), i.e. with the way Hesiod and Homer were distinguished and separated. We will see how differences between the poets that were marginalized before (see chapters 2–3) can also be blown up in order to create the largest possible ‘watersheds’. Of greatest interest, however, is the observation that such differences are very often conceived as polar opposites, so that Hesiod and Homer frequently come to represent the two utmost extremes of several evaluative measure-scales.

In the second section, we will examine the story of the contest between Hesiod and Homer at some length. We will compare the most interesting versions of and references to the ἀγών, with particular attention to the most extended one, the Certamen Homeri et Hesiodi. The main concern of this somewhat elaborate discussion will be to stress the traditional nature of the story and to demonstrate that the tale and its polar presentation of Hesiod and Homer can be shaped in several ways, creating

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1 See on this term ch. 1 and further below.