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Chrysippus on the Hierogamy of Zeus and Hera

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to briefly discuss the philosophical premises of Chrysippus' allegorical interpretation of the hierogamy of Zeus and Hera. The present paper suggests that this infamous piece of allegoresis draws on certain basic ideas of Stoic cosmogony and embryogony. Thus, Chrysippus' allegorical interpretation of the sexual union of Zeus and Hera is shown to have a macrocosmic dimension and a microcosmic one: at the macrocosmic level the cooling down of fire by air symbolizes the generation of the whole universe, whereas at the microcosmic level the cooling down of fire by air symbolizes the generation of an individual soul. While in both cases the hot Zeus is cooled down by the cold Hera, Chrysippus' allegoresis is, thereby, suggested to bring out the latent sense of the Samos (or Argos) mural with a view to illustrating certain well-known ideas of Stoic physics.

Chrysippus' interpretation of the sexual union of Zeus and Hera belongs to one of the most infamous pieces of ancient allegoresis. The extravagance of this interpretation has even prompted some scholars to question the seriousness of Chrysippus' hermeneutical attempts. Thus, for example, A.A. Long in his seminal paper has expressed some doubts as to whether Chrysippus' was earnest in his allegorical interpretation of the Samos (or Argos) mural.¹ Such an assessment, nevertheless, does not sit well the testimonies that present Chrysippus' interpretation as a serious, albeit scandalizing, allegorical suggestion. Origen, who provides us with the most important testimony here, insists that Chrysippus "misinterprets" (παρερμηνεύει) the painting, but he clearly regards it as a serious hermeneutical attempt.² In a similar vein, Clemens Romanus³ and Theophilus Antiochenus⁴ consider Chrysippus to be in earnest, even if they abominate the view he advocates.

¹ A.A. Long, *Stoic Readings of Homer*, [in:] A.A. Long (ed.), *Stoic Studies*, New York 1996, pp. 75–76.

² Origenes, *Contra Celsum*, IV 48 (= *SVF* II 1074 [J. von Arnim, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, vol. I–III, Stuttgart 1968]). Where no English reference is provided, the translation is my own.

³ Clemens Romanus, *Homiliae*, V 18 (= *SVF* II 1072).

⁴ Theophilus Antiochenus, *Ad Autolycum*, III 8 (= *SVF* II 1073).

Finally, Diogenes Laertius, despite comparable indignation, is willing to acknowledge it “as being a contribution to physics” (ὡς φυσικῆν), even if he acquiesces that Chrysippus distorts the myth, since he “fashions this story into something extremely shameful” (αἰσχροτάτην [...] ταύτην ἀναπλάττει ἱστορίαν).⁵

Long’s account has met with several cogent criticisms⁶ and the preponderance of scholars are inclined to assume Chrysippus to have been serious in his reading Stoic ideas into the hierogamy of Hera and Zeus.⁷ As it would be far more difficult to argue that his allegoresis should be regarded as an instance of Stoic “Euhemerismus” and/or “Apologetik,”⁸ the present paper will deal neither with the “ethnographical”⁹ nor with the “apologetic”¹⁰ aspect of Chrysippus’ allegorical interpretation of the hierogamy of Hera and Zeus. Given the fragmentary nature of the extant testimonies, it cannot be ascertained conclusively whether Chrysippus intended to demonstrate that the story should be taken as an ancient prefiguration of Stoic physics or whether he endeavored to exonerate its author from the charges of blasphemy. While in what follows I will rather suggest that Chrysippus interpreted the painting allegorically with a view to expounding Stoic

⁵ Diogenes Laertius, VII 187 (= *SVF* II 1071). Translation by B. Inwood and L.P. Gerson (*Hellenistic Philosophy. Introductory Readings*, Indianapolis 1997, p. 109) slightly modified.

⁶ Cf. P.T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts*, Princeton 2004, pp. 279–282 and R. Goulet, *La méthode allégorique chez les Stoïciens*, [in:] G. Romeyer Dherbey, J.-B. Gourinat (eds.), *Les Stoïciens*, Paris 2005, pp. 112–118. See also T. Tieleman, *Galen and Chrysippus On the Soul: Argument and Refutation in the De Placitis, Books II and III*, Leiden 1996, pp. 220–225.

⁷ Cf. e.g. F. Buffière, *Les Mythes d’Homère et la pensée grecque*, Paris 1956, p. 152; J. Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie: Les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes*, Paris 1976, p. 349; D.E. Hahm, *The Origins of Stoic Cosmology*, Ohio 1977, pp. 62, 82 and 84 (n. 15); P. Gilabert, ‘Eros i el seu paper en la Física de l’Estoïcisme Antic’, *Itaca: Quaderns Catalans de Cultura Clàssica* 1 (1985), pp. 90–96; [The English version of this paper is available at: http://paugilabertbarbera.com:9080/PauGilabert/ang/Barra_ang.jsp?urlDoc=511]; R. Lamber-ton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition*, Berkeley 1986, pp. 210–211 (n. 191); J. Whitman, *Allegory. The Dynamics of an Ancient and Medieval Technique*, Cambridge 1987, p. 32; C. Blönnigen, *Der griechische Ursprung der jüdisch-hellenistischen Allegorese und ihre Rezeption in der alexandrinischen Patristik*, Frankfurt am Main 1992, p. 30; I., Ramelli, ‘Saggio integrativo. Breve storia dell’allegoresi del mito’, [in:] Cornutus, *Compendio di teologia greca*, I. Ramelli (ed.), Milano 2003, p. 459; I. Ramelli, G., Lucchetta, *Allegoria*, vol. 1: *L’età classica*, Milano 2004, p. 112 and C. van Sijl, *Stoic Philosophy and the Eeegesis of Myth*, Zutphen 2010, pp. 132–133. Cf. also *supra*, note 6.

⁸ Cf. e.g. M. Pohlenz, *Die Stoa. Geschichte einer geistigen Bewegung*, Göttingen 1970, p. 97 and P. Steinmetz, ‘Allegorische Deutung und allegorische Dichtung in der alten Stoa’, *Rheinische Museum für Philologie* 129 (1986), p. 27.

⁹ For such an account of Stoic hermeneutics, see e.g. F. Wehrli, *Zur Geschichte der allegorischen Deutung Homers im Altertum*, Borna–Leipzig 1928, pp. 52–64; A.A. Long, *Stoic Readings...*, pp. 68–84; G.R. Boys-Stones, *The Stoics’ Two Types of Allegory*, [in:] G.R. Boys-Stones (ed.), *Metaphor, Allegory and the Classical Tradition: Ancient Thought and Modern Revisions*, Oxford 2003, pp. 189–216; R. Goulet, *La méthode allégorique...*, pp. 109–112 and C. van Sijl, *Stoic Philosophy...*, pp. 97–179.

¹⁰ I have argued against the existence of any apologetic dimension of Stoic hermeneutics in: M. Domaradzki, ‘Theological Etymologizing in the Early Stoa’, *Kernos. Revue internationale et pluridisciplinaire de religion grecque antique* 25 (2012), pp. 141–142; cf. also M. Domaradzki, ‘From Etymology to Ethnology. On the Development of Stoic Allegorism’, *Archiwum historii filozofii i myśli społecznej* 56 (2011), pp. 83–86.

cosmogony and embryogony, it is worth emphasizing that the ensuing reconstruction remains conjectural.

According to Origen, Chrysippus identified Hera with matter and Zeus with god, allegorizing the hierogamy in the following manner: “having received the seminal principles of the god, matter retains them within itself for [the purpose of] ordering the universe” (τοὺς σπερματικούς λόγους τοῦ θεοῦ ἡ ὕλη παραδεξαμένη ἔχει ἐν ἑαυτῇ εἰς κατακόσμησιν τῶν ὅλων).¹¹ Thus, Chrysippus interprets the painting in such a way that the goddess stands for the passive matter which absorbs the creative semen of god that generates the universe. One finds easily a corroboration of Chrysippus’ allegorization in Stoic physics.¹²

We know that the Stoics distinguished between the passive and the active principle of the universe: “that which is acted upon” (τὸ πάσχον) was identified with “unqualified substance” (ἄποιος οὐσία), i.e., “matter” (ὕλη), whereas “that which acts” (τὸ ποιοῦν) was equated with “the reason” (λόγος) in the matter, i.e., “god” (θεός).¹³ While the active and the passive principles are god and matter, respectively, Chrysippus’ clearly interprets the votive image of Hera fellating Zeus as symbolically representing the genesis of the world: Hera is allegorized as the qualityless and receptive matter, whereas Zeus becomes the life-giving, seminal force that shapes the matter in conformity with his design. Importantly, this piece of allegoresis is supported by several etymologies put forward by the Stoics.

Chrysippus is reported to have derived Zeus’ name from the fact that the god “gives life to everything” (πᾶσι δέδωκέναι τὸ ζῆν) whilst the accusative form Δία was derived by the philosopher from the fact the god “is the cause of everything” (πάντων ἐστὶν αἷτιος) and “everything is through him” (δι’ αὐτὸν πάντα).¹⁴ A parallel testimony is provided by Philodemus, who relates that Chrysippus derived the name Zeus from the god’s being the principle and the soul of the world, “in which all life participates” (τῇ τοῦτου μ[ετοχ]ῇ πάντα [ζῆν]), whereas the name Δία was derived from the god’s being “the cause and master of everything” ([πάν]των αἷτ[ι]ος [καὶ κύ]ριος).¹⁵ Finally, this etymological interpretation is also corroborated by Diogenes Laertius who relates that the Stoics derived the name Δία, from the fact that “all things are through him” (δι’ ὃν τὰ πάντα), whereas the name Zeus was derived from the fact that the god “is the cause of life, or permeates life” (τοῦ ζῆν αἷτιός ἐστιν ἢ διὰ τοῦ ζῆν κερχόρηκεν).¹⁶ With regard to Hera, we must note

¹¹ Origenes, *Contra Celsum*, IV 48 (= *SVF* II 1074).

¹² In what follows, I draw heavily on the following works: D.E. Hahm, *The Origins...*, pp. 59–82; P. Gilabert, ‘Eros i el seu paper...’, pp. 81–106; M. Lapidge, *Stoic Cosmology*, [in:] J.M. Rist (ed.), *The Stoics*, Berkeley 1978, pp. 163–180; R.B. Todd, *Monism and Immanence: The Foundations of Stoic Physics*, [in:] J.M. Rist (ed.), *The Stoics*, Berkeley 1978, pp. 139–155 and M. Pohlenz, *Die Stoa...*, pp. 75–81.

¹³ Diogenes Laertius, VII 134 (= *SVF* I 85, II 299–300). Translation by A.A. Long, and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1: *Translations of the Principal Sources with Philosophical Commentary*, Cambridge 1987, p. 268.

¹⁴ Stobaeus, I 1.26 (= *SVF* II 1062).

¹⁵ Philodemus, *De piet.*, 11 (= DDG 545b 12 = *SVF* II 1076).

¹⁶ Diogenes Laertius, VII 147 (= *SVF* II 1021). While this etymology can be traced back to Plato (*Cra.* 396a7–b2), it is later embraced by such authors as the Stoic Cornutus (3.5–9 after C. Lang, *Cornuti theologiae Graece compendium*, Leipzig 1881) and Heraclitus the Allegorist

that the Stoics adopted the traditional etymological interpretation of Hera (Ἥρα) as air (ἀήρ).¹⁷ Now, if Zeus is the ultimate cause of life and Hera is air, then the question arises how can the goddess stimulate the generation of divine semen that produces the world?

In order to answer the question, we must first stress that the name “Zeus” was only one of the numerous terms that the Stoics had for the ultimate cause of all life. With reference to this life-giving force, the Stoics used interchangeably such terms as “seed” (σπέρμα), “fire” (πῦρ), and “breath” (πνεῦμα).¹⁸ Secondly and relatedly, we should also observe that the Stoics characterized fire as hot and bright, whereas air as cold and dark.¹⁹ If now Hera is identified with cold air and Zeus is equated with hot fire, then the gods’ intercourse may rather straightforwardly be interpreted as symbolizing the cooling down of fire by air. We can see, thereby, that Chrysippus puts forward a cosmological interpretation of the Samos (or Argos) painting: the cooling down of fire (Zeus) by air (Hera) results in the production of water (seminal fluid), which then generates the rest of the universe. Such a cosmogony is, indeed, presented by Diogenes Laertius, who reports the Stoics to have believed that:

The cosmos comes into being when substance turns from fire through air to moisture, and then the thick part of it is formed into earth and the thin part is rarified and this when made even more thin produces fire. Then by a mixing from these are made plants and animals and

(23.6 after D.A. Russell and D. Konstan, *Heracitus: Homeric Problems*, Atlanta. 2005).

¹⁷ Diogenes Laertius, VII 147 (= *SVF* II 1021). Juno (Hera) is identified with air also in *SVF* II 1066 (= Servius, *ad Verg. Aeneid.*, I 47) and in *SVF* I 169 (= Minucius Felix, Octav., 19.10). F. Buffière (*Les Mythes d’Homère ...*, p. 107) suggests that the Hera/air etymology goes back to Homer (*Il.* XXI 6). While Plato (*Cra.* 404c2) is definitely familiar with it, Cornutus (3.16–18) and Heraclitus the Allegorist (15.3) accept not only the etymology but also offer highly comparable allegorizations.

¹⁸ For an identification of seed with “the primary fire” (τὸ πρῶτον πῦρ), see e.g. *SVF* I 98 (Aristocles in Eusebius, *Praep. ev.*, 15.14.2), for an equation of seed with “breath blended with moisture” (πνεῦμα μετ’ ὑγροῦ), see e.g. *SVF* I 128 (Eusebius, *Praep. ev.*, XV 20). In *SVF* II 1066 (= Servius, *ad Verg. Aeneid.*, I 47) Jove (Zeus) is equated with aether (i.e., fire), whereas in *SVF* I 169 (= Minucius Felix, Octav., 19.10) the god is interpreted as the heaven. In general, the Stoics’ pantheistic view of god as an omnipotent force that permeates the whole of the universe made it natural for the philosophers to assume that there is in reality just one deity that only manifests itself differently. Consequently, the Pantheon of the traditional Greek gods and goddesses proved to be nothing more than a self-externalization of this one pantheistic deity (interchangeably referred to as *Pneuma*, *Logos*, Zeus, etc.). That is why in his famous *Hymn* (Stobaeus, I 1.12 = *SVF* I 537), Cleanthes characterized Zeus as “the Ruler of nature” (φύσεως ἀρχηγός) who is “almighty” (παγκρατής) and therefore “many titled” (πολυώνυμος). This view of god as having many powers and, correspondingly, many names, is testified by Diogenes Laertius (VII 147 = *SVF* II 1021) and Aetius (I 7.33 = *SVF* II 1027). As for Chrysippus, Stobaeus (I 79.1 = *SVF* II 913) reports the philosopher to have used terms such as Fate, *Pneuma*, *Logos*, Providence, Truth, Cause, Nature and Necessity interchangeably, whereas Diogenes Laertius (VII 135–136 = *SVF* I 102) relates the Stoics to have identified God, Intellect, Fate, and Zeus with one another, and to have assumed that god “is called by many other names” (πολλὰς τ’ ἑτέρας ὀνομασίας προσονομάζεσθαι). I discuss the issue in: M. Domaradzki (“Theological Etymologizing...”, pp. 125–148), where I also argue that the early Stoics’ view of god entailed using etymology as a tool for deciphering the manifold manifestations of one and the same deity.

¹⁹ Plutarchus, *De prim. fr.*, 948d–e (= *SVF* II 430).

the rest of the [natural] kinds (γίνεσθαι δὲ τὸν κόσμον ὅταν ἐκ πυρὸς ἢ οὐσίας τραπῇ δι' ἀέρος εἰς ὑγρότητα, εἴτα τὸ παχυμερές αὐτοῦ συστάν ἀποτελεσθῇ γῆ, τὸ δὲ λεπτομερές ἐξαραιωθῇ, καὶ τοῦτ' ἐπὶ πλεόν λεπτυνθὲν πῦρ ἀπογεννήσῃ. εἴτα κατὰ μίξιν ἐκ τούτων φυτὰ τε καὶ ζῶα καὶ τὰ ἄλλα γένῃ).²⁰

While Diogenes Laertius specifically acknowledges Chrysippus as one of the most prominent proponents of the doctrine,²¹ somewhat earlier he also explains that the Stoics held that the turning of substance was actuated by god, “who is the seminal principle of the world” (σπερματικὸν λόγον ὄντα τοῦ κόσμου) and who “stays behind as such in the moisture, making matter serviceable (εὐεργόν) to himself for the successive stages of creation”.²² This account of the genesis of the universe in terms of a transformation of the elements accords nicely with Chrysippus’ exegesis: the whole cosmos is created from fire (Zeus) and air (Hera) through water (semen) to earth (the world).²³

Yet, apart from its macrocosmic dimension, the cooling down of fire by air can also be argued to have its microcosmic aspect. In the cosmogony just mentioned, god, who, as we have noted, is the seminal reason of the cosmos, is likened to “the seed contained in the seminal fluid” (ἐν τῇ γονῇ τὸ σπέρμα περιέχεται).²⁴ While the Stoics eagerly compare the generation of the world to animal procreation (so that the origin of the cosmos becomes very much like the birth of a living organism), they also perceive the cosmic *pneuma* as being analogous to the bodily *pneuma*. We know specifically that Chrysippus drew a parallel between Zeus and the world, on the one hand, and man, on the other, comparing providence (i.e., Zeus) to a human soul.²⁵ If the world’s soul resembles a man’s soul, then the generation of the universe must be very much like the generation of the soul, for in both

²⁰ Diogenes Laertius, VII 142 (= SVF I 102). Translation by B. Inwood and L.P. Gerson, *Hellenistic Philosophy*... , p. 134. Chrysippus continued the biological model that Zeno employed in his cosmogony, see e.g. D.E. Hahm, *The Origins*... , pp. 82 and 156; R.B. Todd, *Monism and Immanence*... , pp. 148–155 and M. Lapidge, *Stoic Cosmology*... , p. 167.

²¹ A parallel testimony on Chrysippus’ belief in the transformation of fire through air to water and earth is provided by Plutarchus, *De Stoic. repugn.*, 1053a (= SVF II 579).

²² Diogenes Laertius, VII 136 (= SVF I 102). Translation by A.A. Long, and D.N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*... , p. 275. Cf. also Stobaeus, I 20.1 (= SVF I 107). Aristotle has been shown as an absolutely crucial precursor to Stoic cosmobiology, see in this respect D.E. Hahm, *The Origins*... , pp. 34–48 and 70–78. Cf. also R.B. Todd, *Monism and Immanence*... , p. 144; M. Lapidge, *Stoic Cosmology*... , p. 168 and M.J. White, *Stoic Natural Philosophy (Physics and Cosmology)*, [in:] B. Inwood (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Stoics*, Cambridge 2003, pp. 135–136.

²³ It has to be borne in mind that in the Stoics’ monistic physical theory, the active and passive principles of the universe are actually two sides of the same coin. Thus, fire (i.e., Zeus, breath etc.) is the primary element (i.e., the self-generating seed) that actually transforms itself (i.e., “turns substance”) into water and earth through air. Cf. *supra*, note 18.

²⁴ Diogenes Laertius, VII 136 (= SVF I 102).

²⁵ Plutarchus, *De comm. not.*, 1077e (= SVF II 1064). F. Buffière (*Les Mythes d’Homère*... , p. 142) rightly stresses (*ad loc.*) that “Zeus joue dans le monde le même rôle que l’âme dans l’homme”. On the analogy between cosmogony and embryogony, see especially D.E. Hahm, *The Origins*... , pp. 60–82 and P. Gilabert, ‘Eros i el seu paper...’, pp. 87–106. Cf. also M. Lapidge, *Stoic Cosmology*... , pp. 169–170 and J. Whitman, *Allegory*... , p. 35.

cosmogony and embryogony, the interaction of hot fire and cold air brings about life.²⁶

The Stoics maintained that the prerequisite for the generation of the soul was an exposure of the fetus' hot inner spirit to the outer air, whose temperature was significantly lower than that of the womb. Thus, Plutarch reports Chrysippus to have believed that every embryo is endowed with the "spirit" (πνεῦμα) which at birth changes into the "soul" (ψυχή) as it is "cooled down by air" (ψυχόμενον ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀέρος).²⁷ While already this source informs us that in order to account for the genesis of the soul the philosopher posited an etymological connection between the words "cold(ness)" (ψυχός) and "soul" (ψυχή), several other testimonies also attribute to Chrysippus the conviction that the "spirit" (πνεῦμα) of the fetus becomes a "soul" (ψυχή) as it is exposed to this "cooling" (περιψύξει) at its birth.²⁸ If one also recalls that from Zeno onward, the Stoics equated the soul with the fiery *pneuma*,²⁹ then the generation of the soul transpires to be very much like the generation of the universe: at a child's birth air cools down the hot *pneuma* of the infant, whereas at the beginning of the world it cools down the hot *pneuma* of the universe. To put it in terms of Chrysippus' allegoresis, we might say that in both cases the hot Zeus is cooled down by the cold Hera: at the macrocosmic level the cooling down of fire by air symbolizes the generation of the whole universe, whereas at the microcosmic level the cooling down of fire by air symbolizes the generation of an individual soul.

²⁶ For the cooling and, thereby also, vivifying function of air, see the testimonies which von Arnim included into the section on the genesis of the soul from the cooling of the *pneuma* (SVF II 804–808). Of special importance for our considerations are the testimonies provided by Plutarch (SVF II 806) and Hippolytus (SVF II 807), as they unequivocally attribute this doctrine to Chrysippus – cf. *infra*, notes 27 and 28.

²⁷ Plutarchus, *De Stoic. repugn.*, 1052f (= SVF II 806).

²⁸ For a connection between ψυχή and περίψυξις, see Plutarchus, *De Stoic. repugn.*, 1053d; Idem, *De prim. fr.*, 946c; Idem, *De comm. not.*, 1084e and Hippolytus, *Philos.*, 21 (= *Dox. gr.* 571.17). For a connection between ψυχή and ψύχω or ψύξις, see Plutarchus, *De Stoic. repugn.*, 1052f and Origenes, *De prin.*, II 8.3. Plato associates (*Crat.* 399d10–e3) the word ψυχή with ἀναψύχω, whereas Aristotle associates (*De an.* 405b28–29) it with κατάψυξις.

²⁹ Thus, in SVF I 135 (= Diogenes Laertius, VII 157) the soul is characterized as πνεῦμα ἐνθερμον, whilst in SVF I 146 (= Epiphanius, *Adv. haeres.*, III 2.9) it is πολυχρόνιον πνεῦμα.