

ANALYSIS

"Cock-Crow" (1965)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"'Cock-Crow' [is] another reminiscence that metamorphosed into a narrative of Amphytrion and Heracles... In 1965 [Allen Tate] wrote her that 'Cock-Crow,' a section of her new novel that appeared in *The Southern Review*, was the best thing she had ever written'."

Ann Waldron

Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 359, 356

"'Cock-Crow'...centers on the story of Hercules, or Herakles, and is important in illuminating Miss Gordon's chief subject, which she calls 'Two branches of a lifelong study: the life and times of the hero.' In it we are reminded that, after the incident of the infant's slaying of the serpents, Tiresias recommended that the child's name be changed from Alcides to Herakles 'because he would eventually become the glory of Hera.' Miss Gordon goes on to mark many implicit parallels in the life of this powerful, violent god to events connected with the story of Christ--Alcmene hears the cock crow three times after the infant has strangled the serpents; the child is of course the son of a god and a mortal woman; during a time of withdrawal to Mt. Cithaeron, he chooses in a vision a maiden named Virtue over one named Pleasure; he shows 'premonitory respect' for virginity; he seems to follow 'some inner voice.'

Heracles suffered terribly throughout his life, sometimes, Miss Gordon points out, 'when he was crazed by the gods for their own inscrutable purposes.' But as long as he was in his right mind, he never deserted his calling--'a life of toil.' His toil was conflict, and his chief work was a 'lifelong combat with the monstrous, in whatever guise it showed itself.' Today, in contrast, we are occupied most of the time, she tells us, with 'watching the dragon coil and uncoil in the 'earth of our own hearts.' The mythic hero who kills the dragons foreshadows the coming of the one who conquered sin and death. But the primordial darkness remains within us, despite the victory of the light that the darkness could not comprehend....

The 'lower pattern' of which she speaks is the primordial world of archetypes that, as she says, 'lies at the bottom of every human consciousness.' The 'upper pattern' is no doubt a story of Christian conversion and of the workings of grace in a particular life, located in a specific place and time--'a Dantesque story which will preserve the 'actuality of events'.... With its 'upper' and 'lower' stories, Miss Gordon's writing is epic in accord with the two symbolic structures... On the mythopoeic level, the epic journey symbolizes a quest for the integration of the component parts of man; it is a search for wholeness, for the union of earth and sky gods. It requires a descent into darkness; its obstacles are women and death. Its virtues are magnanimity and valor. In contrast, the Christian epic speaks allegorically of the progress of the soul; a glimpse of love and joy--what Jacques Maritain calls a 'flash of reality'--impels it on its quest. The obstacle to be overcome is sin; the journey is toward grace, toward light out of darkness; but there is nevertheless a confrontation of the abyss. Woman is the mediatrix of grace in this journey, the Beatrice figure who impels and guides....

Even her short stories are shaped by an epic vision, though one may be obliged to consider many of them fragments of that wide and majestic outlook. In all of her stories the man does what he 'must'; he follows a code of honor that is fundamentally destructive to the feminine ancestral principle. Miss Gordon's early novels demonstrate his unvarying defeat; but as her works reflect more of the Christian eschatology, her epic vision changes its tone from tragic to comic."

Louise Cowan

"Aleck Maury, Epic Hero and Pilgrim"

The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 13-14

"A number of critics have analyzed Caroline Gordon's interest in the 'decrescendos of heroism.' However, it would be more accurate to say that she deplores the waning public recognition of heroes, a subject she treats specifically in one of her later works, 'Cock-Crow' (1963): 'For a long time now, these men who stayed at home [because age or a disability kept them from going to war] and more recently, the women, who, whether they like it or not, must be defended and, latterly, the very children, who if *they* are to grow up to be heroes, must be protected, have been markedly slow to render the hero the homage which is his immemorial due.' In ages that decreasingly believe in the possibilities of heroism, the traditional responsibility of the artist--to proclaim the values of the community by upholding heroes worthy of emulation--is more difficult. Novels set in the twentieth century deal extensively with this problem, but earlier societies also suffer when their men of thought fail to contribute to and direct their communities....

Gordon as artist is like the Tiresias she describes in 'Cock-Crow': 'preeminent among the Greek seers for the reason that he saw further and more clearly than any of his priestly confreres. His vision extended into both the past and the future. It is up to the reader to interpret that vision carefully and perceptively."

Rose Ann C. Fraistat
Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters
(Louisiana State 1984) 38-39, 42

"In 'Cock-Crow' Caroline combined her impressions of her childhood at Merry Mont with her love for Greek mythology...a lyrical mixture of autobiography and mythology."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 364

Michael Hollister (2018)