

REGIMENT OF WOMEN

F U K I N F I N D A B E T T E R R O L E . . .

REGIMENT OF WOMEN.
Thomas Berger.
Simon and Schuster. 1973.
\$8.95.

"Cornell bent over to fetch it, and as he came up he saw Ida trying to see his breasts through the neck of his blouse."
-REGIMENT OF WOMEN

REGIMENT OF WOMEN is a book about sexual roles, one which suggests that society wouldn't change a lot if women were to assume control and take over the positions of authority now held by men. Set in the year 2056, this light satirical novel follows the career of an unlikely shitworker named Georgie Cornell as he drops out of the neo-feminist empire and return to a more primitive way of life.

At first, it is a puzzling novel, because Berger reverses the costumes and roles we recognize as those of contemporary men and women, his intention clearly being to place the reader on the level of Georgie, a secretary in a publishing house. Nothing would be

askew if Georgie's clothing did not include siliconed breasts and a miniskirt. The other workers in the office dress in the same manner. The women bosses, on the other hand, wear suits and smoke cigars.

The male reader might gain some insight into what a woman's life is like, but Berger doesn't take the plot anywhere. In 2056, men have fallen into a subservient role and women have taken over the country. There is a lot of irony and some insight, but a close examination shows a simple thesis going nowhere. Berger implies the sexual roles are fucked up, not the people themselves, and his cigar-smoking women are no different in their roles as executives and generals and senators than the males who preceded them were. What begins as an interesting idea degenerates into a sadomasochistic farce. Men who cannot adjust undergo "anal-therapy," a treatment in which they are fucked in the ass by feminine shrinks wearing dildoes. If they feel no pleasure, that is their problem. Since childhood they have

learned that raping a woman is the cardinal sin, one which might result in a disease called pregnancy. The tone is pure cynicism. What comes across is the idea that women are castrators and rapists (anal-therapists), however ironic the point of view.

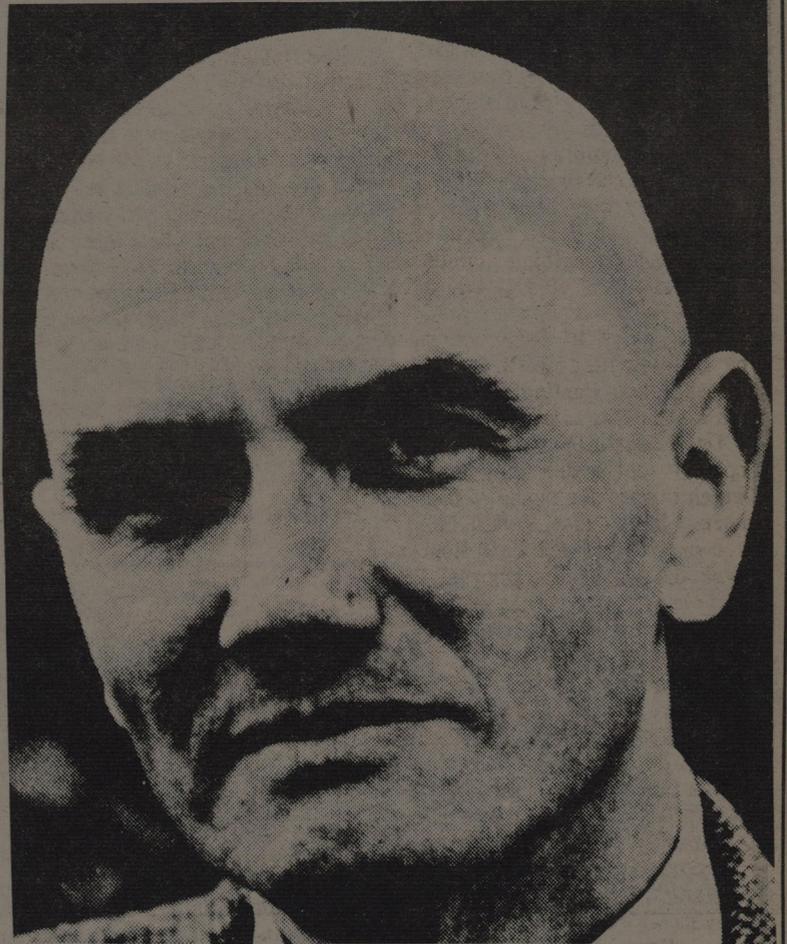
This is not to imply that REGIMENT OF WOMEN is not a fascinating semantic trip. Sequences are funny and may stand on their own merit. Georgie being drafted into the Sperm Service, where his newly found friends in Men's Lib expect him to organize the recruits and get them to masturbate to prevent the militant women from milking them of their sperm, is a light parody of the current draft system. Cornell's critique of what the new draftees are expected to do is cogent commentary on women's education in many parts of America:

"Cornell discovered the second privilege of the barracks leader, the first being the bonnet: he was not expected to participate, or at any rate not very ardently, in the activities to which he led his men. These were largely in the home-economics area--cooking, sewing---the beautician field: makeup, hairstyling. Then there were arts & crafts: dancing, fingerpainting, and whatnot. From what he could see, the curriculum was a little less sophisticated than that of the average boys' high school, so it would be redundant for many of the conscripts. But he could understand that the Sperm Service had a problem in keeping the men occupied. They were here, as Peters said, to be milked. The rest was waiting."

Ultimately, Berger is pointing out the realities of human life in any culture where sex is the decisive factor. Men reading Regiment of Women may gain some insight into the belief held by many women that men are the oppressors, the enemy:

"Women," said Harry, perhaps fortunately paying no attention to Cornell's embarrassment, "are more intelligent than men, but less emotional. They have to run the world; they do not have the time to squander on personality. They must deal with things, with issues, and with people as things and issues. How could the President, for example, cope with international problems if she were personally vulnerable to every little sight, real or imagined? You must admit, if you are honest, that the fundamental concern of man is his own vanity." Harry smiled. "Now of course, that, or rather what comes from it, can be charming, so charming, in fact, that it can even lure certain women from the stern path of duty--"

On the private side:
"Cornell frowned. 'I've never managed that,' he said. 'I've read



about it in novels or seen it in pictures, but in life I can't recall distracting a woman for more than fifteen minutes. Or maybe I've always met the wrong ones. Raving egomaniacs, most of them. You listen to them talk about their work and politics and sports and their bank accounts and their fascinating friends---whom, by the way, you never meet, any more than you get access to their bank accounts--and then you try to talk about what interests you or even about your troubles, I mean, you can be in the most distress, and what do they do? Listen? No, they begin to paw you."

Georgie has his troubles. The reader has to get used to his viewpoint, and it's not easy, but once into the game it is stimulating.

It's going to bring out the drag queen in a lot of you guys.

The escape and regression to the primitive that ends the book smells like Huxley and numerous other science fiction writers whose rejection of modern technology provoked a rejection of urbanity and an elevation of the pure and natural world of pre-technology. Groovy. But a couple of characters like Georgie and Harriet are not going to last the night in the forest, and one may only frown at the re-affirmation of missionary sex with man as "bui-lder and hunter".

I felt this book to be sympathetic with the Women's Movement at certain points, but in the end it becomes an indictment of feminism, an attack through parody and satire. Why? Because all of the women in power are portrayed as empty cliches, and none of them have any positive qualities, no humanity, sympathy, empathy sensitivity. What are we supposed to make of the ending? Are we supposed to see Georgie as oppressed woman or oppressed man? Is Berger saying the sexual reversal was unnatural: that men should not try to be what they are not? It makes sense to see Georgie as oppressed woman, but if we do, then the conclusion is unsatisfactory. Georgie and Harriet escape, but they will be caught and executed, and it will make little difference which of them has "the protuberant organ."

By placing a young man in a woman's role in future America, Berger shows the reader how conditioned he is to think in terms of gender. Georgie takes off his skirt and puts on a pair of pants and he gets arrested by a couple of women for being a transvestite. Later on when Harriet removes the band from her breasts and puts on a blouse, she commits the same crime. "Here we are, two. What can we look forward to?"

No doubt Ms. will provide us with the answer.



from Georgie Straight-Ups

GRAPHIC: JANET WOLFE STANLEY