

The Secretary: Capitalism's House Nigger
by Kathi Roche

We're all aware of the dismal statistics, and behind them the grim reality, of women's place within the labor market, that give lie every ad that tells us we've come a long way. I doubt if there's a hash-slinger alive, however, who wouldn't trade places with the Virginia Slim model, who makes more in an hour for looking plastic than a union laborer makes in a day. Which brings me to the subject of those of us who have deceived ourselves into thinking we have come a long way because we've managed to escape the ranks of waitresses, janitresses, or even fulltime housewives who, let's face it, are paid nothing for performing the same labor as those professional domestics who are paid at least the most meager of wages. I'm talking about the corporate and bureaucratic secretaries, private and otherwise, many of whom consider themselves "professionals."

Well, no matter how professional we may be, and no matter how important we are to the workings of the system - and we are important, the hard truth of the matter is that we're simply glamorous, sometimes well-paid, working models of the traditional domestic/sexual functionary. The paragon of the "efficient" secretary and the snide "sexy-secretary" jokes attest to the existence of this business version of our socio-cultural role.

My quarrel is not with the value of the work itself. Many of us can indeed find inherent worth in what we do with competence, and the administrative aspects involved offer satisfaction, within the limitations of the role. My quarrel is with those limitations themselves, and with the deeper psychology that is an underpinning of the role and which acts, in the long run, to reinforce and perpetuate these very limitations.

How many secretaries do you know who rose "through the ranks" to a job which, after years of experience, they were qualified to hold? Damn few. The very concept of the secretarial role imposes limitations that prohibit rising above "one's class" and these limitations work effectively, with few exceptions. That is because a secretary is, first and foremost, a servant, in the most servile sense of the word, and any spark of creativity one may glean from the job is pure cream. We are the cleaner-uppers, the keepers of the office, the human processing machines for work that is not ours or, if it is, we receive no credit for it. Every piece of creative work involves mundane tasks for its administration and application, and that's the end assigned to us. Years of experience contribute only to the prospect of a better, higher-paying secretarial job, perhaps something administrative, but creative...? Heaven forbid! Let's leave that to the thinkers and the doers.

How does one come to be considered a thinker or a doer? Certainly not by being a secretary. Yet women are still told that the best-way-to-break-into-business-is-to-learn-typing-and-shorthand, and we continue to buy that line. Indeed, a whole educational curriculum has established itself on this myth, and many of us who wanted to really "get somewhere" actually shelled out near-college-rate tuition to attend private business schools that would make us the envy of every poor file clerk. Those of us whose potential might have produced a real thinker sold out, dumbly accepting our preassigned place behind the typewriter, and, once there, worked ever harder at self-fulfillment by steadily perfecting our self-images as Gals Friday. Overlooking the "deadend" signs on this road to self-defeat, we increased our "efficiency," perfected our smiles and our bottled beauty, the-better-to-serve-you-coffee-with-my-dear.

And when things got bad, and we couldn't understand why we felt stifled by the humdrum of it all, we reassured ourselves of our worth. We reminded ourselves of that "special place"

behind The Man, never questioning the psychology of the role and what it was doing to us. The majority of our bosses were, no doubt, well-intentioned men, whose praise for our work, unfortunately, was bestowed on sponges. For, however momentarily uplifting it may have been, that praise came to mean little in the face of a larger source of morale that went beyond The Man himself: we had learned to vicariously experience The Man's own status and prestige, and perceived those attributes as our (counterfeit) own. The more important and powerful he became, the more smugly we basked in the afterglow. Our "maternal instincts," carefully conditioned in years past, were put to work as we eagerly, and with a sense of duty and reverent responsibility, became supporters for the egos of the Creators. (The poor man, what would he do without me.) And the more we supported, the more we became subconsciously aware of our own diminishing importance before that Bestower of All Good, until we had come full circle, from stove to typewriter, still desperately identifying with that which we could never become. And so, in the interests of selfish survival, we settled for second best, and continued to cater to our Image.

And of course, the system has succeeded in once again dividing us and turning us against one another. We all know the infighting, bickering and sniping that goes on among "those impossible girls at the office." As a matter of fact, our submergence in the competitive, back-biting ambience of the business world has succeeded in honing to perfection our ability to head for each other's jugular, lest we lose our few hard-won goodies and get edged out of our job as the vp's secretary by some young, sexy female from the steno pool. Our carefully nurtured image as the woman behind the throne must not be jeopardized at any cost, and so we continue to hate and fear one another, further isolating ourselves from reminders of what we are, or could have been, or might be, if that girl from the steno pool gets a toehold.

For you see, we have not changed one iota in status since the day we entered the office. Whether we're in the steno pool or behind the Chairman of the Board, we're all in the same time-honored bag (for women) of servitude, and the forecast for the future doesn't herald a change. I can see the day (as a matter of fact, I think it's here) when women are informed that the world of computers "needs" women who are "experienced and qualified" to help run the brave new world. We'll march ahead, armed with our degrees and flourishing an air of professionalism, only to find that, instead of typing letters, we'll have been relegated to - you guessed it - programming the computers.

A word of warning here. The well documented ability of technology to free humans for creative existence has served as a panacea for many of us at one time or another. Unfortunately, the mere growth of technology does not assure us that, willy-nilly, we will all be freed sooner or later. Like any other system, technology can be twisted by the abuse of power to create a new prison for certain classes. Only until we abolish the corporate class system that is maintained by the creators of technology can we be assured of a free and unfettered future. If we don't abolish it, we'll have come an even longer way, baby, but don't you ever forget that the token surprises The Man holds in store for us will only be alternative routes to service at the dinner table.

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