

Feminist Narratives

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Introduction

“Once upon a time, a princess set out to look for a job which would make full use of her abilities. To her surprise, she found a series of barriers placed in her path – simply because she was a woman.” So begins the synopsis provided by the members of the feminist animated filmmaking collective Leeds Animation Workshop for their 1994 animated short *Through the Glass Ceiling*. This was the first in what would become a trilogy (also comprising 1996’s *No Offence* and 1999’s *Working with Care*), produced over the course of that decade, which responded to the sexist inequalities of 1990s Britain through the familiar formal modalities, storytelling strategies, and character types (all drawn with a feminist twist) of the animated fairy tale.

The films chart the life and times of a princess named Ella, as she navigates her way through the absurdities of life for women under patriarchy, beginning with her early life adventure in the Equal Opportunities Kingdom of Fantasyland where she attempts to succeed using a prototypical form of ‘lean in’ (Sandberg 2013) feminism that advocates for women to aspire to leadership positions in the corporate executive world. In this way, and several others, the films were prescient in anticipating many of what would prove to be the key cultural debates about gender during millennial postfeminism (McRobbie 2004; Gill 2007; Tasker and Negra 2007) of the 1990s-2000s and since, including Ella’s struggles to manage her work/life balance, the dilemmas of working motherhood, and her encounters with an idealised formation of masculinity that I have elsewhere termed ‘postfeminist fatherhood,’ arguing for its status as the hegemonic masculinity of millennial postfeminism (Hamad 2014).

Leeds Animation Workshop’s Princess Ella trilogy manifests some similarities with earlier feminist blockbusters from mainstream cinema like *9 to 5* (Colin Higgins, 1980) - specifically the animated musical sequence in which Lily Tomlin’s Violet Newstead conjures a revenge fantasy that

she mentally enacts against her misogynist boss in the guise of Disney's Snow White (see Davis 2018). Moreover, it anticipates the representational and modal strategies of later Hollywood features like *Enchanted* (Kevin Lima, 2007), which self-referentially revels in using its combination of animation and live action to update and renegotiate the gender politics of the Disney fairy tale (see Tasker 2011). The Princess Ella films likewise delight in showcasing the efficacy of negotiating (explicitly and intersectionally feminist in this case) gender political content and subject matter by combining fairy tale, animation, fantasy, and irony.

Following the character of Ella over the course of her life across the three films, this chapter contextualises the Princess Ella trilogy within the post-second wave feminist history of feminist animation by women filmmakers in the ensuing decades leading up to the turn of the millennium, and as part of the Leeds Animation Workshop oeuvre. It explores how each of the three films make use of the forms, functions, and modes of its combination of fairy tale and animation in order to mobilize and narrativize a searing critique of the principally gendered social inequalities (but also encompassing issues arising from intersections of gender with race, class, sexuality, ability, and age) that the films offer up as characteristic of postfeminist life under patriarchy for women (and others) in Britain in the 1990s.

Feminism and animation

Animation, especially that produced independently in spheres beyond the mainstream film industries, has often been associated with the creation of feminist films by women filmmakers, especially since the rise to prominence of second wave feminism in the 1970s, along with politically adjacent and contemporaneous cultural movements like the emergence of women's film and video collectives (Hedditch 2003). This phenomenon has been much remarked upon by animation scholars and critics who differently write about animation as a medium of catharsis for feminist narratives and representation. Paul Ward, for example, highlights the "long association between animation and female expression," especially where animation's "specific mode of representation" is used to

address social issues and to make “feminist-oriented” political statements (2005, 83-84). Irene Kotlarz notes the “specifically feminist challenge” offered up to mainstream filmmaking by women animators for both “political” and “artistic reasons” or the combination thereof that unfolded in tandem with second wave feminism from the 1970s onwards (1990a, 15). Antonia Lant remarks upon the prevalence of animation as an “aesthetic choice... for feminist filmmakers” (1993, 180), while animator and writer Ruth Lingford highlights the “distinctive feminine and/or feminist perspective” (2003) that has characterised so much of the work independently produced by women animators in Britain. In particular, Lingford identifies the 1980s and 1990s aftermath of the UK women’s liberation movement, the cultural reverberations of which echoed into the ensuing decades through various forms of expression including animation.

In her landmark publication *Women & Animation: A Compendium* (1992), published at the time that *Through the Glass Ceiling* was being conceived and researched by Leeds Animation Workshop, animation studies scholar Jayne Pilling laid down a feminist gauntlet for what is ideologically at stake for women and their representation in animation, via the potentialities that are opened up by what can be achieved, realised, and expressed in this form. As Pilling writes, “animation as a form offers such potential to explore women’s issues in a way that simply isn’t possible in live-action filmmaking” (1992, 5). In a similarly feminist-oriented vein, Paul Wells, following Pilling, likewise contends that “animation, more than any other form of film-making offers the opportunity to operate in a safe space... outside the constraints of patriarchal norms, both with regards to the means of production, and the modes of representation” (1998, 199). Thinking again across both cultures of production and textual representation and making the case for animation as a sphere of filmmaking that opens itself up to women more so than the wider mainstream film industries, Lingford also highlights the tendency towards feminism and feminist content in women’s animation, noting as she does the “strong strand of women’s animation which takes as its theme ‘the personal as political’” (“Women’s Animation” 2003). In so doing, she points to animators like Kayla Parker and Joanna Quinn as filmmakers whose work manifests this tendency.

Parker's *Unknown Woman* (1991), *Cage of Flame* (1992), and *Walking Out* (2000), for example, all deal with aspects of women's experiences, subjectivities, and interiorities from an ostensibly feminist standpoint, differently (and respectively) thematising menstruation, the feminist interpretation of myth, and patriarchal sexual abuse and predation. Quinn's films, including *Girls Night Out* (1987), *Body Beautiful* (1990), *Elles* (1992) *Brittania* (1993), and *Famous Fred* (1996), likewise offer the "distinct feminist and/or feminist perspective" noted by Lingford as characteristic of women's animation ("Women's Animation" 2003). Contemporaneous with the work of feminist filmmakers and animators like those outlined above were the feminist films of Leeds Animation Workshop – specifically, their triptych of works that has come to be known as the Princess Ella trilogy, named for the central protagonist who the films follow through the different stages and milestones of her life from childhood through to middle age, as they chart her experiences of living as a girl and then a woman under patriarchy.

Leeds Animation Workshop – Feminist Ethos, History, and Working Practices

Prior to its formal establishment as a filmmaking collective (one comprised of all women) in 1978, members of the group who would later come together as Leeds Animation Workshop, all of whom were active or involved in the then current UK women's liberation movement, collaborated in the production of the animated film *Who Needs Nurseries? We Do!* (1978) (Tasker 2016, 122). The rationale for and the subject matter of this film was directly responsive to one of the movement's demands: the state provision of free childcare in the form of 24-hour nurseries (Jolly 2019, 90). The original *raison d'être* of the group and the impetus for the production of its first film was feminism, something that would characterise the collective's approach to filmmaking in perpetuity as founding member Terry Wragg explains: "we brought a feminist viewpoint to all our films whatever they were about," and "our main point [at least initially] was to make tools for the women's movement." (2022)

Leeds Animation Workshop was one of several independent women's film collectives to come out of the period of time spanning the 1970s and 1980s - a particularly radical time in the history of both women's filmmaking and filmmaking in Britain, characterised by the challenge posed to commercial filmmaking practices in the mainstream film industries by radical film collectives, via what Else Thomson (paraphrasing Sylvia Harvey) describes as their "integrative, collective, production methods" that used "oppositional form and subject matter" (Thomson 2020, 1; Harvey 1992). The ethos and working practices of the Workshop have thus been informed by feminist values and wider principles of social justice since its pre-inception and throughout its history into its ongoing activities in the present.

In its early years, the Workshop worked principally via techniques associated with traditional cel animation and rostrum camera photography (see Kotlarz 1990b, 240; Wragg cited in Tasker 2016, 122; Lavine 2023, 227), albeit initial work on the films was done without ownership of their own rostrum, which only came later with the provision of an equipment grant awarded to them by Channel 4, which enabled the purchase of such a camera, along with their own Steenbeck for editing (Wragg cited in Tasker 2016, 122-123). As Seymour Lavine (2023, 229) writes:

From the early 1990s, the Workshop had established a 'house style'. This style consisted of a cut-out animated, utilitarian look and feel, where the character movements were functional, with... rudimentary body movements. As production moved into the mid-1990s and beyond, production became more computer-based... [but] still retained the house style. During production, many discussions that the Workshop members would have with each other focussed on ideas about imagery. For example, *what type of imagery would constitute stereotyping in the representation of characters in their films*, would be a common topic of discussion.

Speaking to film scholar Yvonne Tasker about the necessity of feminism in animation at the levels both of production, and of textual representation, Wragg recalls the selection of their third film

Pretend You'll Survive (1981) for the animation strand of that year's London Film Festival, a work that reflected the collective's interest in nuclear disarmament and campaigning around this issue. Wragg explains:

The festival had two animation programs, the British program and the world program. Gillian Lacey [a member of the collective at the time] and I went to see both of them. We were the only women directors of any of the featured animations, and our character in our film was the only female main character. She was also the only woman character in any of those films who had clothes on. Some of the others had female subsidiary characters, but they were naked or wearing bikinis. Well, one or two of them were dressed but pushing a Hoover – in one case wearing a bikini and a pushing a Hoover! Those were the entire sum of the representation of women in film at the time, it seemed like, and it was most noticeable in the animation programs. (Wragg, cited in Tasker 2016, 124)

There is an extent to which we can understand Wragg's explanation here in terms of what Wells describes elsewhere as "resistance to 'Boopism'" [in reference to the infamously sexualised 1930s Fleischer Studios character], something he goes on to characterise as "more than just a rejection of highly sexualised design. It is a direct response to the male representations of women; masculine codes of composition and narrational construction, and personal social and political agendas concerning men. It is also a recognition of the possibilities available to women once these codes have been overturned." (1998, 199) Something else that this quotation from Wells makes clear is the extent to which feminist cultures of production and feminist textual representation must necessarily go hand-in-hand. Just as the association between animation and feminist filmmaking by women practitioners has been long and fruitful, so has the association between women's animation, feminist narratives and fairytale, which time and again has been taken up by filmmakers as a framing device, a

storytelling mode or the inspiration for a film's premise, themes, characters, audio-visual landscape, or some combination thereof.

Fairy Tale and Feminist Narratives

Fairytale has proven apposite as a means by which to use animated form (itself already so heavily associated with this storytelling mode due to the extent to which Disney has loomed so large in this endeavour throughout film history) to shine a light on women's interiorities and experiences, and to intervene in the cultural logics of patriarchy. This mode of storytelling has itself gone hand-in-hand with the feminist turn in scholarly thinking about fairytales that emerged in the context of second wave feminism (Lurie 1970) and which gave rise to the academic field of feminist fairytale studies (Haase 2004). The tendency in animated films made by women filmmakers to tell women's stories through a fairy tale mode, or to reinterpret fairy tales in ways that privilege the subjectivities of girl and women characters, is something that has been correspondingly observed and reflected upon by various animation studies scholars, including Wells (1998). Remarking on the extent to which women's animation has lent itself readily to more subjective forms of expression, especially relative to what he describes and positions it against as "male-dominated orthodox animation," Wells writes that "The creation of animated dream-states mixes easily with subjective interpretations of fairytale," and arguing that "This enables women animators to address topics which many male animators could not deal with" (199). Among them: feminist topics, spanning the spectrum of all aspects of the experience of life as a woman under patriarchy.

Noteworthy examples from the fruitful period for women animators and feminist narratives that ensued from second wave feminism and preceded the production of Leeds Animation Workshop's *Princess Ella Trilogy* have included, for example, Vera Neubauer's BFI Production Board funded film *The Decision* (1981). The film uses the familiar fairytale scenario of a princess with a selection of suitors from which to choose as a platform from which to explore contemporary sexual

politics, gender politics, and the politics of motherhood and domesticity, cutting between the drawn animation of the fairytale fantasy scenario to live-action shots of domestic drudgery, and using irony to juxtapose two competing formations of normative femininity, both of which differently serve the same purpose to prop up the cultural logics of patriarchy (Sharman 1992; Lingford 'Decision, The (1981)' 2003). Candy Kugel and Vincent Cafarelli's *Snowie and the Seven Dorps: A Passive/Aggressive Fable for the 90's* (1990) "puts a new slant on an old fairy tale" (Pilling, 'Candy Kugel and Vincent Cafarelli' 1992, 30), spinning the Snow White narrative and using it to explore the dynamics and gender politics of interpersonal relationships during early postfeminism. Finally, Marjut Rimminen and Christine Roche's *The Stain* (1991) mixes drawn animation, object animation and voice-over narration to present a dark narrative of patriarchal domestic violence and family trauma through the familiar storytelling mode of the fairytale (Pilling, 'The Stain' 1992, 38-40). In the specific case of Leeds Animation Workshop, as Else Thomson notes, their films "use fairy-tale narratives aimed at adults to explain and explore difficult subjects" (2020, 4), in service to their feminist politics and social justice ethos. This bent towards fairy tale or fairy tale adjacent storytelling in women's animation has, correspondingly, also taken place in tandem with the uptake, whether implicit or explicit, of feminist narrative positions and feminist characterisation. There are few examples more explicitly feminist in both respects than the Princess Ella trilogy.

The Princess Ella Trilogy – Origins

According to Wragg, the first film in the Princess Ella trilogy, *Through the Glass Ceiling*, was originally conceived as a follow-up to the Workshop's earlier sexism and misogyny themed film *Give Us a Smile* (1983), in part due to the impact made by second wave feminism, and the gains ostensibly won by the women's liberation movement (2022; on *Give Us a Smile* see also Thomson 2017; Hamad 2021; Lavine 2024, 281-282). This had given rise to an altered legal landscape in which, for example, the Equal Pay Act (1970) had long since been enshrined in law and, therefore, to ostensible social change

for the better. However, it remained the case in the 1990s aftermath of second wave feminism that women's experience of everyday life, including and especially in the workplace, remained characterised by gendered inequalities and by the cultural logics of patriarchy. The starting point for the films that would become the Princess Ella trilogy was therefore the question of what would or should come next for feminism and for women in this landscape in which the women's liberation movement had taken place, but in which patriarchy and its logics had persisted in holding sway over the gender dynamics of everyday life, and of both public and private sphere working life in particular (Wragg 2022).

The Workshop had been successful in obtaining funding towards the production of the film (which was not yet being conceived of as a trilogy) from the European Commission, via its department with a remit to deal with gender equality. As Seymour Lavine writes, explaining the context for the provision of these funds towards production of the film, and what it meant for the Workshop:

At the time, several EC departments needed to raise awareness of advancements in, and the benefits of, new social legislation and short films and videos were considered ideal ways to do this. To be considered for project funding required a partnership approach with established organisations that were either experts in a relevant field or that worked with parts of society that would benefit from the legislation. These requirements enabled the Leeds Animation Workshop to meet and forge partnerships with a range of organisations from across countries within the European Union and in so doing, grow its distribution network significantly beyond the UK (2023, 246-247)

Correspondingly, and following the Workshop's earlier Europe funded workplace health and safety themed film *All Stressed Up* (1993), the European Commission offered the Workshop a percentage of funds towards the production of a film about gender (in)equality, but it required them to source co-

funding from elsewhere. Having received information to the effect that a programme production was in the works about the so-called 'glass ceiling' barrier to advancement for women in the workplace, and that its producers might be in the position to commission some animated content for inclusion in it, the Workshop proceeded to seek this co-funding from the BBC (Wragg 2022). The programme in question transpired to be an episode of the current affairs series *Business Matters* called 'Breaking the Glass Ceiling', produced by Erica Griffiths, and eventually airing on television on BBC2 at 8pm on 8 July 1993.

The members of the Workshop were initially circumspect about this prospect and subject matter, as it was felt by some that the issue of the 'glass ceiling' was a problem that affected relatively privileged women, working in elite professions and in the business world (Wragg 2022). It was therefore possibly beyond the Workshop's self-determined remit to address social issues of direct relevance to the lives and experiences of ostensibly ordinary women. But on further reflection the collective decided that gender-based workplace inequalities and gendered double standards in employment practices and working cultures of the kind that were going to be addressed in the film were indeed social problems with the potential to negatively impact upon all women, and they agreed to pursue this potential collaboration with the BBC further (Wragg 2022).

Griffiths likewise agreed that the inclusion of some animated content in the BBC programme would be welcome, and she proceeded to visit the Workshop at their premises in Leeds where members were working up an idea for not just bespoke segments and snippets, but for a whole film (Wragg 2022). Wragg had produced a few pages' worth of script material which, she recalls, she had "based on a fairy tale" (2022). This was done on the ostensible grounds that to change deeply embedded thinking informed by patriarchal cultural logics (i.e. "women aren't leaders, women can't do those kinds of jobs..." etc.) as the Workshop hoped to do with this film, retelling traditional stories and fairy tales in ways that shone a light on the problem of the 'glass ceiling' would be particularly efficacious, with vast potential for familiar reference points to serve as neat devices for

narrativization, characterization, and thematization (Wragg 2022). As Wragg recalls, “I just started thinking about traditional stories and fairy tales and I thought, if you can go back to ‘Once upon a time...’ and just change that a bit, it might work” (2022). This, in animated form, it was felt, had the potential to be a more universally accessible and entertaining means of addressing the issues arising from women’s experience of workplace inequalities, and changing people’s attitudes about them, than raw citation of statistical data, or the dry presentation of research findings (Wragg 2022). The canon of traditional stories and fairy tales would prove itself to be fertile ground for the feminist storytelling that the films engaged in: “Whenever you needed a plot twist of any kind, you could find something in the stories.” (Wragg 2022)

This confidence in the accessibility of the film’s fairy tale reference points transpired to be well founded. As indicated above, being part of the European Commission’s funding stream required the Workshop to make partnerships with other projects in other countries. One such partnership later took them to a conference in Sicily where the finished version of *Through the Glass Ceiling* was screened to an audience of women from different countries and cultural contexts. Despite this, as Wragg explains “They totally got it. Every reference... because they recognised those traditional stories” (2022). It was a reassuring experience to the collective that, due to the ostensible universality of fairy tale storytelling as a device for feminist narrativization, the film would be able to travel beyond the UK and Anglophone nations. Griffiths was highly enthused by the Workshop’s idea to address women’s experience of workplace inequalities in the form of an animated fairy story, and she and the collective agreed to proceed with their collaboration. Wragg proceeded to work on the story as a standalone film (identifying segments that would carry over to what was needed) while Griffiths continued to develop her programme (2022). In this way, the Workshop was able to secure enough money to co-finance their grant from the European Commission and continue work on the film that would become *Through the Glass Ceiling*.

The fairy tale mode that all three Princess Ella films adopt was thus in place as a storytelling device right from the initial thinking that was being undertaken about the script at the Workshop following Wragg's development of her script idea. From there, the creation of a variation to the archetypical fairy tale princess character drawn to embody and represent women's experiences of the glass ceiling in the workplaces of the 1990s followed. A number of different character designs were drawn up for Princess Ella (many of which remain in the Workshop's archive today), and various versions were considered before the iteration of the character that we see in the finished film was settled upon – as Wragg describes her: “somebody with big boots,” (2022) in apparent reference to the self-possession required of women who want to achieve career advancement under patriarchy.

Through the Glass Ceiling (1994)

The intersection of feminist themes and fairytale storytelling, which is the signature characteristic of the Princess Ella films, is signalled immediately by the title of *Through the Glass Ceiling*. On the one hand, this is an intertextual reference to Lewis Carroll's fairy tale-*esque* storytelling in the follow-up to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), entitled *Through the Looking Glass* (1872). The title thus connotes the film's uptake of the fairytale mode in its storytelling and characterisation, along with all its intertextual references to familiar fairytale figures, character types, and scenarios. On the other, substituting the 'looking glass' of the literary reference with the 'glass ceiling' of patriarchal workplace culture highlights that the film's substantive subject matter will be (mainly) women's experiences of sexism and inequality at work.

The voice-over narration (performed throughout by Alan Bennett), introduces the character of Princess Ella in the most familiar and archetypical of ways: “Once upon a time... a little princess was born.” But indicative of the film's intent to confound expectations of the familiar, we learn that Ella's birth was in fact “not very long ago.” Instead of taking us to the fairytale world of the distant past, *Through the Glass Ceiling* uses tropes, characters, and themes of the traditional fairytale to

shine a light on workplace cultures of the present of its time and place of production, and with a plainly drawn design for the central character that seems purposefully to resist employing the exaggerated curves, contours, maquillage, and characteristics of face, hair, body, and dress that has tended to typify the sexualised hyper-femininity of animated fairytale princesses normalised by Disney. Like Princess Aurora of Sleeping Beauty, this little princess has three fairy godmothers. But unlike their better-known counterparts who bestow on their charge the hyperfeminine gifts of beauty, song, and the promise of 'true love's kiss', this trio presents Ella with gifts of toys typically associated with boys' play, according to the gender bifurcated logics of children's culture of the time, and that are intended to nurture her intelligence, ambition, and potential to excel in the public sphere workplace. They thus imagine her a future brain surgeon, captain of industry, or government minister.

The arrival of Wicked Aunt Tabitha sees Ella condemned to a dead-end future of clerical labour as she is cursed that upon turning sixteen, she will learn to type. After a childhood protected from typewriters, she is summoned to a college careers interview where Tabitha tricks her into sitting at one, whereupon she collapses into a deep sleep while ages pass until, in a time beyond 'post-feminism', she reawakens in the 'age of equality' when "The dark night of sex segregation is over!" as one godmother informs her. There follows a series of vignettes, each taking a well-worn scenario from a familiar fairytale as means to showcase the extent to which the heralded 'age of equality' into which Ella has awoken is anything but, as she encounters one sexist barrier after another on her frustrating journey to a job "with prospects." Factory chairs and lunches, office chairs and lunches, and executive chairs and lunches take the place of the familiar bowls of porridge as the tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears is used to depict Ella's aptitude for business leadership. The glass slipper from Cinderella doubles up for the interview process as Ella is offered a job, rather than a hand in marriage, later, wistfully singing like Snow White for the day when her promotion, rather than her prince, will come. Passed over for promotion in favour of Tom, then Dick, then Harry, working harder and better than her male colleagues is fruitless for Ella until her godmothers cast a

magic charm declaring “You too shall go to the Board.” Accompanying the Chair of the Board to a nearby forest sporting a red riding hood, Ella is pawed (groped), as he reveals himself a wolf (perpetrator of workplace sexual harassment) threatening to deny her promotion unless she submits to his advances in a take on Red Riding Hood that literalises the menace of patriarchal sexual violence ever inherent to the Wolf/Red dynamic.

Fleeing on horseback to the equal opportunities kingdom of ‘Fantasyland’ Ella competes for work as a dragon slayer with rival applicant John. Despite having his efforts enabled by others while Ella toils solo, and despite slaying fewer dragons, John is appointed Chief Dragon Slayer to the King, while Ella (in a neat parody of patriarchy’s siloing and devaluation of so-called ‘women’s work’) is appointed “Assistant Dragon Slayer, with special responsibility for baby dragons, emotionally disturbed teenage dragons and elderly dependent dragons.” Her protests are met with counter-protests about Fantasyland’s equal opportunities policy and its wealth of professional development opportunities for women subjects, as the film lampoons the hollow rhetoric of 1990s workplace equality agendas and tokenism in hiring practices, initiatives revealed by the godmothers as the perpetuation of patriarchy in disguise.

Ella applies for a position in the Palace of Power despite warning that the way will be long, hard, and dangerous. There follows a montage of archetypical trials and tribulations endured and overcome by her in pursuit of her career goal, deftly symbolising barriers to women’s advancement that characterise the postfeminist workplace: she must cross the gender salary gap (a chasm to be cleared on horseback), she must avoid being cast into the typing pool, and in a nod to the tale of The Snow Queen, she must overcome the female executive whose heart is frozen by “the struggle, hard work and isolation” of climbing to the top of her lonely mountain as the token women in a senior leadership position. Ella follows the path to the Palace of Power with a magic laptop gifted her by a seven-headed noble lady (bearing heads of Personnel, Admin, PR, Marketing, Trading, Welfare, and Catering) who frees her from a spell cast by the ice queen. Presented as the antithesis of her frozen-

hearted counterpart who is out to remain at the top of her empowered but lonely mountain by herself, the seven-headed lady instead uses magic powers (an elevated position of workplace influence) to heal and help others. However, seven heads notwithstanding, she has only one pair of feet, so her jobs do not take her far, and she cannot climb the mountain any higher than her own grotto.

Arriving, Ella encounters seven besuited men: Dozey, Weary, Lazy, Bossy, Grumpy, Greedy, and Shifty who, appalled at the arrival of a woman, conspire to ignore, exclude, interrupt, patronise, and belittle her, giving her menial labour to perform and making unwanted sexual advances, all in an effort to keep her out of the Palace and preserve the integrity of Fantasyland's patriarchal *status quo*. Ella gains an audience with the Emperor, survives an openly sexist interview process, is granted wings, and appointed to the position of 'high-flyer' pending a managerial opening at one of his castles. She ascends, finding other high-flyers who break the news that her wings can take her no further: "you've reached the glass ceiling." Unable to accept this, Ella collaborates with under-privileged and under-promoted women workers to produce a report on the economics of the glass ceiling, making a compelling business case for workplace equality that convinces the Emperor to make a trade agreement between Fantasyland and Utopia, which is cemented by his decision to diversify Fantasyland's workforce and remove the glass ceiling from the Palace of Power.

In its final act, *Through the Glass Ceiling* thus pushes back against the individualistic 'lean-in' style of false feminism that would become characteristic of women-in-leadership discourse of ensuing decades, going to lengths instead to shine a light on intersecting oppressions that produce cognate phenomena to the glass ceiling such as the so-called 'sticky floor' that keeps marginalised groups from progressing past entry level or dead-end positions. We leave Ella smiling, having flown through the glass ceiling she is now in charge of her own castle.

***No Offence* (1996) and *Working with Care* (1999)**

The Princess Ella films were not originally conceived as a trilogy. But following the completion of *Through the Glass Ceiling*, the Leeds Animation Workshop were looking for their next project, and they turned their attention this time to cognate issues of harassment for the follow-up *No Offence*. The film uses the familiar and apt premise of Bluebeard (a wealthy businessman revealed to have murdered his succession of mysteriously disappearing wives) as a narrative device for its feminist critique of sexual (and other forms of) harassment in the workplace. *No Offence* also makes use of a range of familiar fairytale figures, once again adopting an ironic affective register in using the fairytale mode to further the narrative of the first film, extending the earlier feminist critique of gendered inequalities in the workplace and barriers to women's advancement to focus, this time, on harassment. The film depicts mainly sexual harassment of women by men, but extending the critique to homophobic, racist, ableist, and ageist harassment, going to lengths to depict such harassment in explicitly intersectional terms.

Princess Ella (still recognisable by the red curls, rose cheeks, simple orange dress and 'big boots' that characterised her original design in *Through the Glass Ceiling*) is now grown and become Queen Ella, still reigning over her castle in Fantasyland. It was decided to revisit this character not only because she had worked well in the first film, but also because we leave her at the end of it in charge of her own castle. A story was therefore developed around the idea of what would happen next, and the possibilities of that scenario for animating the depiction of harassment in the workplace (Wragg 2022). In *No Offence*, Ella goes undercover as a worker in her own castle, where she herself quickly experiences sexual harassment (presented as having been caused by an "evil enchantment" placed upon the male workers). Wittily showcasing the representational and storytelling possibilities of animation and fantasy, the film literalises the well-known euphemism of "wandering hands," as those of the palace chef are disembodied, flying away from his arms to grope his female coworkers.

Continuing to use traditional fairy stories as reference points, using themes, character types and scenarios that lend themselves to feminist critique of the issue at hand, *No Offence* showcases a range of toxic masculine behaviours, using familiar villains from fairytale and other mythic storytelling. These include Bluebeard: Lord of the Gnomes (a sexist Chief Executive responsible for engineering the disappearance from the castle of workers Curlylocks, Dame Trot, Bo Beep, and Puck - all victims of patriarchal harassment by their male superiors in Queen Ella's Department of Abodes and Dwellings), Iron John (a sexist office manager who polices the way his female subordinates dress, demanding normatively feminine attire and enabling their sexual harassment) and the troll under the bridge from the Three Billy Goats Gruff (the tenant of a rental property who reveals himself a murderous misogynist and implied sexual predator from who Ella must flee after knocking on his door to collect rent).

The character of Lord Bluebeard is particularly significant in this respect for the archetypally patriarchal intertextual baggage carried by him, via the reference being made here to the well-known figure of *Barbe bleu*, or Bluebeard, from the fairy tale of the same name, the best known version of which comes from the seventeenth century French folk tale iteration of the story that was committed to paper and published in 1697 by Charles Perrault (in Hallett and Karasek eds. 1996; see also Warner 1995, 241-271; Warner 2014, 63-73). Best known as a cautionary tale of monstrous masculinity, misogyny, and the potential dangers to women of the exercise of patriarchal power and male sexuality, Bluebeard tells the story of a powerful man whose succession of wives mysteriously disappear before he is revealed to have serially murdered them. Using this tale's premise as a jumping off point to animate the continuing social and cultural problem of workplace harassment as a feminist narrative, *No Offence* goes to lengths to highlight what is potentially at stake for victims of harassment to speak out in workplace contexts and cultures that remain set up to enable the preservation of patriarchal structures and logics. Here, however, Queen Ella stages a feminist intervention to this status quo by drawing up and implementing a harassment policy and complaints procedure, and by turning Lord Bluebeard into a frog.

Remarking on the genesis of the third Princess Ella film *Working with Care*, Wragg explains that having made two films that followed this character, “it seemed to make sense to make it into a trilogy” and “it seemed very natural that Ella would grow up and have children” (2022). The final film in the trilogy thus explores Queen Ella’s dilemmas as a working mother and wrestles with “the riddle of work, life and care” (Wragg 2022). Like the earlier two films, although less heavily so in terms of explicit intertextual references, *Working with Care* engages in fairytale storytelling to critique gendered double standards in care work, principally that of parenting, but also, significantly, of elder care. By addressing some of the new gendered double standards of parenting to which millennial postfeminism had given rise in the 1990s, following the challenge to traditionally gendered social roles posed by second wave feminism, *Working with Care* presciently lampoons the period’s most prized iteration of ideal masculinity - ‘postfeminist fatherhood’ (Hamad 2014): the hegemonic formation of masculinity *par excellence* at the turn of the millennium.

Following the cultural logic of postfeminist fatherhood and the means by which it negotiates itself as progressive at little cost to existing patriarchal power structures vis-à-vis the division of domestic labour in parenting, and the relationship of that division to the economy of the public sphere workplace, *Working with Care* uses humour to contrive a scenario whereby excessive praise is heaped upon a father for doing basic care work for his own child. For this, he is granted the reward of a three-week reprieve from the work of parenting while the mother must juggle the demands of work, childcare, and elder care.

The father in question is Queen Ella’s husband, Prince Charming. We meet the two of them at the outset of the film, at which time Ella is apparently living “happily ever after” as a successful businesswoman (she retains her signature look from the previous two films, but this time with the telltale addition to her ensemble of a smart red briefcase, befitting her executive position), presiding over model equal employment practices in her workplace, and about to give birth to a little prince. As the storyteller of the voice-over narration informs us, “She and Prince Charming agreed to bring

up their baby according to principles of equality.” But what we see unfold in the scenario that ensues is a *tour-de-force* of postfeminist irony in that regard. We are shown a domestic working arrangement in which Ella leaves for work in the mornings while her husband stays home to look after the baby before they each switch roles at lunchtime. With the arrival of their second child, Ella starts coming home at lunchtime to find chaos in the domestic space, as the paraphernalia of parenting and child’s play are strewn all over their living room floor. Then, as the narrator informs us, “One day, Prince Charming was asked to go on a tour delivering lectures about fatherhood.” This entails a three-week absence from the home, while Prince Charming leaves Ella home alone to work her job, solo parent, and perform elder care for her ailing fairy godmothers, all in the name of “advancing equality.” By the time of his eventual return, Ella, a “part-time working single parent” has created a newly caring and work/life balanced society from the uncaring and workaholic wasteland of ‘Megalomania’, a thinly veiled avatar for Thatcher’s Britain and its aftermath.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that some of the workplace scenarios depicted across the Princess Ella trilogy have disappeared from the landscape of contemporary cultures of employment (such as the women’s typing pool), contemporary audiences of the Princess Ella trilogy still understand and recognise the gendered inequality inherent to its narratives, and it nonetheless remains the case that the concept of so-called ‘women’s work’ remains widely understood. All three films have screened at film festivals in recent years, including the London Feminist Film Festival, which included *Through the Glass Ceiling* and *No Offence* as part of a celebration of 40 years of Leeds Animation Workshop at a dedicated afternoon of screenings and discussion at the Rio Cinema in Dalston, London, in December 2018. They continue to resonate with audiences, indicative (unfortunately) of the enduring relevance of the subject matter and the inequalities depicted and their continued applicability to the social dynamics of life under patriarchy today.

As Thomson notes of Leeds Animation Workshop's ongoing impact on audiences, "Dissemination of their message via digital streaming and social media networks has ensured new audiences for these important, politically oriented, women-centred narratives." (Thomson 2020, 4) As Wragg has further remarked, in reference to the renewed cultural currency of their films in the context of fourth wave feminism and other social justice-oriented political movements of recent years: "We wanted to be doing something we felt was worthwhile and would help people and means something to people. At certain times through our history we have been somewhat looked down upon for that, but the current generation seems interested again in politics and in bringing art into other aspects of life and vice versa" (cited in Tasker 2016, 131). In these ways and others, the feminist narratives of Leeds Animation Workshop continue to do important ideological work in service to the achievement of social justice. These films joyously showcase the possibilities and pleasures of using animation as a tool to articulate feminist political concerns about gender and other intersecting oppressions and inequalities, bearing out the claims staked for the feminist potentialities of the form by scholars like Kotlarz (1990a), Pilling (1992) and Wells (1998), and they do so with playful creativity, with acerbic wit and humour, and with the imaginative abandon that only the animated medium can allow for.

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