

For Those on Glass Cliffs: The Nature of Women in Power as Explored through *Frozen*, *The Abramson Effect*, and "Let It Go"

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ABSTRACT This paper seeks to explore the link made by Deborah Spar in her recently published piece *The Abramson Effect: Tales of Women Who Topple From Power* between the effects of the glass ceiling and glass cliff effects on women in the topmost positions in American businesses, organizations, and corporations and the ascension to power of Queen Elsa in the Disney motion picture *Frozen*. By incorporating media reports on merchandising and animation, as well as scholarly research, this paper places Spar's theory into a more accessible space. Furthermore, by referencing the lyrics to the feature power ballad from the animated film, it more closely aligns Elsa's tale with those of women such as Jill Abramson herself, for whom Spar's piece is named. While no formal criticism or research has been published on the Abramson Effect thus far, the exploration of the glass ceiling effect and the glass cliff effect in this work establishes a theoretical basis from which it is possible to conclude that Spar's assessment of the current state of affairs in the American workplace is entirely accurate.

**The snow glows white on the mountain tonight,
Not a footprint to be seen.**

The relationship between women and power has a long, dynamic history. Although one may speak vaguely of women being powerful, when one considers the notion of

women *in* power, a significant barrier presents itself. In *The Abramson Effect: Tales of Women Who Topple From Power*, Deborah Spar uses the Disney hit, *Frozen*, as a means of conceptualizing the rise to, fall from, and nature of power.

If the landscape of power could be made analogous to one of the many snowy mountains in *Frozen*, we would see more heavily trodden trails of familiar names and faces -- Michelle Obama, Gloria Steinem, Oprah Winfrey -- of well-known women who are openly recognized as extraordinary. But beyond that, these women's steps fade out, covered over with a fresh dusting of snow as the years pass by. One finds oneself standing at the edge of an untouched blanket of snow indicating the unmarred potential for exploration and growth, for travel towards the looming mountain of success. But which way should one climb? And, perhaps a more concerning query, what became of the women whose footsteps have faltered and disappeared in the near distance?

A kingdom of isolation and it looks like I'm the queen.

Queen Elsa, who ascends the throne after the death of her parents, is precisely the kind of woman that little girls wish to emulate. A *Wall Street Journal* article examining *Frozen* merchandising notes that the sales of Elsa dolls, dresses, and other novelties have far surpassed that of her younger sister, Anna. A clear explanation for such a dramatic difference emerges through a young girl's interview, "Elsa has powers and she's pretty" (Byron and Ziobro, "Elsa Dominates Anna in 'Frozen' Merchandise Sales"). This striking statement clarifies that Elsa's character embodies the characteristics that many young girls hope to exude and, further, indicates the importance of the simple conjunction "and." Women in high level positions cannot simply have powers of intellect, strong business sense, or any other career-related attributes, they must also be conventionally attractive.

In that vein of argumentation, *TIME* recently published a piece entitled, "Do Female Animated Characters

Need to be 'Pretty'?" which explores ideals of beauty that have become imperative in the realm of popular animation. The head animator of *Frozen*, Lino Disalvo, caused an uproar when he stated that female animated characters were more challenging to animate than their male counterparts. While there is significant room for misinterpretation here, returning to the original quotation offers the opportunity for insight: "Historically speaking, animating female characters are really, really difficult, 'cause they have to go through these range of emotions, but they're very, very -- you have to keep them pretty..." (Stampler, *TIME*).

Thus, women are not only struggling against institutionalized barriers to reach the highest positions in their respective field, they are expected to complete the same feats as their male contemporaries while maintaining a fresh face. If this is true of animated princesses, how much more so does this affect the women who live in a kingdom far, far from Arendelle?

**The wind is howling like this swirling storm inside.
Couldn't keep it in, Heaven knows I tried.
Don't let them in, don't let them see.**

Spar opens her piece with the striking example of Jill Abramson -- for whom the piece is named -- and her dismissal from the role of executive editor at the *New York Times* in May of 2014. After eleven years at the paper and four years at its head, Abramson was fired openly in the newsroom. Spar follows Abramson's tale with mentions of women such as Sallie Krawcheck (former finance executive at Bank of America and Citigroup), Ann Curry (formerly of the *Today Show*), and Tina Brown (creator of *The Daily Beast*). Each of these notable women was dismissed publically with little or no explanation of their removal and then promptly forgotten. The memory of these once-powerful women was easily glossed over with a fresh coat of historical veneer by the organizations and publications

that seamlessly replaced them, an act that is becoming a standard practice in nearly every field.

**Be the good girl you always have to be.
Conceal, don't feel, don't let them know.
Well, now they know!**

Besides holding high ranking positions, Spar points out another set of common denominators for the women mentioned, "All these women, like Elsa, were initially heralded for their power, their magic, and, yes -- in nearly all cases -- their looks. And all, in the end, were toppled from the cliff" (Spar, 140). And, thus, the formula for success and subsequent disaster emerges: an initial praise of power, the possession of great skill, and the display of socially accepted beauty. How is it that these qualities -- the same that make a woman a prime candidate for a high-ranking position -- are the same that makes her a likely victim of "the glass cliff" (Spar, 118) effect? Such a woman can climb this cliff, perhaps without realizing how high she has risen until she is primed to fall, and is subsequently overthrown by those who fear her power or find fault in the exercise of such power.

In an interview with the Harvard Business Review, Susanne Bruckmüller explains what feminist scholars mean when they speak about the glass cliff effect. Citing two researchers at the University of Exeter, Michelle Ryan and Alex Haslam, she explains,

"Ryan and Haslam called this phenomenon of appointing women in times of organizational crisis, the "glass cliff...One could say that they have managed to break through the glass ceiling and so now they're on top. But their situation is more risky and more precarious than it would be if they were leading in a successful organization. So just like standing on top of a cliff, it's more dangerous than standing on top of a mountain. That's why it's called the glass cliff. In parallel to the glass ceiling metaphor, but also to show the precariousness and the risk that these women face" (*Harvard Business Review*, 2011).

Let it go, let it go!
Can't hold it back any more.
Let it go, let it go!
Turn away and slam the door.

And what, precisely, occurs when a woman like any of those mentioned by Spar "let's it go" and fills the role she has worked for, using her talents as she is finally able to? In most cases, she is reprimanded, ridiculed, or removed. In such instances, these women are not slamming any doors at all, unless it is the one they must close behind them on their way out.

In their collective book, *Breaking the Glass Ceiling*, Ann Morrison, Randall White, and Ellen Velsor indicate that the glass ceiling effect is still very present in modern office politics. Despite the Department of Labor's "Glass Ceiling Initiative" in 1989, women continue to face invisible barriers to success and ascension through the ranks of executive leadership. Issues include "lack of opportunities for...women to take advanced education programs and career-enhancing assignments, and the lack of accountability of equal opportunity within the leadership ranks" (Morrison, White, Velsor, 1994, xiii). Even with legislative support for women and minority groups, then, they continue to face difficulties in achieving and retaining topmost positions

I don't care what they're going to say.
Let the storm rage on.
The cold never bothered me anyway.

And when they must relinquish their role, they plunge from the glass cliff they had fought for so long to summit, perhaps without initially realizing that only a glass ceiling awaited them at the top. While Elsa may not have cared what was said about her, it is unlikely that she would have faced the widely publicized onslaught of insults and criticism that have become possible in the modern day. Abramson, for example, was called a "source of widespread

frustration and anxiety" (Spar, 19), "stubborn and condescending" (Spar, 19), and -- disappointingly -- "bitchy" (Spar, 19). Perhaps this is where the analogy of *Frozen* begins to differentiate itself from the lived reality of women in power: the cold of unemployment, of a ruined reputation, and of the loss of power are certainly more than bothersome.

**It's funny how some distance,
Makes everything seem small.**

Between 1967 and 2009, the number of women in the workforce rose from 14.8 million to 43.2 million. As Spar indicates, however, they are present in a way that is "much broader than deep" (Spar, 56). Furthermore, "they are not presiding in any way that even approaches equality" (Spar, 56), emphasizing the horizontal spread of women through the annals of the American workforce. From the topmost position of any given field, it is even clearer for women that they are truly alone, accompanied only by their female counterparts working far below them. From the peak of the glass cliff, it is certain that several things must seem small: the number of women beside them, the space between themselves and the glass ceiling they are ceaselessly approaching, and the margin for error.

In their collective research on the glass ceiling effect, David Cotter, Joan Hermsen, Seth Ovadia, and Reeve Vanneman define four criterion for establishing the presence of a glass ceiling. First, "A glass ceiling inequality represents a gender...difference that is not explained by other job-relevant characteristics of the employee." Second, "a glass ceiling inequality represents a gender...difference that is greater at higher levels of an outcome than at lowers levels of an outcome." Third, "A glass ceiling inequality represents a gender... inequality in the chances of advancement into higher levels, not merely the proportions of each gender...at those higher levels." And finally, "a glass ceiling inequality represents a gender...inequality that increases over the course of a career. (Cotter, Hermsen,

Ovadia, and Vanneman, "The Glass Ceiling Effect", 2001, p. 657-659, 661). While it is unclear whether Spar adheres to this criteria when she indicates that a glass ceiling was certainly present in all of the examples cited, it does serve as a general research framework for future research on the Amramson Effect.

And the fears that once controlled me, can't get to me at all

**It's time to see what I can do,
To test the limits and break through.
No right, no wrong, no rules for me.
I'm free!**

As Elsa rises to power, "she induces fear in the men around her and looks fabulous while doing so" (Spar, 128). Our icy heroine belts the very ballad woven throughout this piece as she breaks all the rules set for her by the society in which she exists. Acting as the reigning monarch of her kingdom, however, she has a significantly greater ability to test her limits and, certainly, a far better chance of breaking through to whatever lies beyond.

For the women of today's workforce, there is a right, a wrong, and a significant number of rules that box them in. Besides what is ethically possible for them, they must also adhere to ideals of beauty and feminine behavior. While it is certainly possible for them to shirk such seemingly extraneous principles, there are disadvantages to this rebellious action. Any display of radical action may cost them an important invitation, a significant raise, or a desired promotion. At the rapid rate women are currently being hired and fired from positions of leadership, it seems that there is no opportunity for differentiation which could jeopardize their place or justify their ultimate dismissal.

**Let it go, let it go.
I am one with the wind and sky.
Let it go, let it go.
You'll never see me cry.**

As the cycle of hiring, firing, and replacement continues, we must consider the group who perpetuates it and what they are seeking in potential candidates. Spar puts it plainly, "[men in power] will tend to replicate their own traits when considering those who will succeed them" (Spar, 109). So which characteristics catch the attention of men in search of a suitable successor?

**Here I'll stand, and here I'll stay.
Let the storm rage on.**

But what can women do? How can they bear the force of the storm that presses down on them as they struggle up that infamous glass cliff? They must stand. They must stay. What choice do they have in the storm's continuation or direction?

**My power flurries through the air into the ground.
My soul is spiraling in frozen fractals all around
And one thought crystallizes like an icy blast
I'm never going back; the past is in the past!**

The skill, education, and intelligence possessed by women rising to the heights are not by any means diminished by the force of the icy blasts of institutionalized sexism they face. Their efforts may not result in permanent positions for themselves, but slowly they can effect the tide of history and create a place for women at the top. They must refuse to allow the workforce to return to its previous state, to allow themselves to be taken from power without leaving a mark, or to be silent when their voices have such great power.

**Let it go, let it go.
And I'll rise like the break of dawn.**

This trend of hard climbs, brief summits, and hard falls must cease for the betterment of our society as a whole. Who better than women to bring it about?

**Let it go, let it go
That perfect girl is gone
Here I stand, in the light of day.**

While women who "dare to climb the towers of power get destroyed, cut to shards by the very organizations over which they once reigned" (Spar, 31), the fact remains that they continue to rise. There is an admirable resilience in women who are aware of the incumbent risks of their rise up the career ladder and pursue it regardless of the danger. If men seek strength of mind, ability to withstand criticism, and success in spite of barriers, their eyes should be upon those women scaling the glass cliffs below them. If day is going to break over the darkness of our current state of affairs, there must be a torchbearer and it is my firm belief that she and her fellows are climbing now.

**Let the storm rage on!
The cold never bothered me anyway...**

Although Elsa's story reaches a neat conclusion, as all fairytales must, the accounts of women who have risen and fallen are not silver-screen-ready. They are messy, they are uncomfortable to consider, but more than that, they are significant. Women seeking to rise certainly recognize the chance of a fall and having the ability to continue to climb is a privilege we must recognize. We must look up, but we should also look back, seeking to aid those behind us. The storm is raging on and we must press forward.

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