

THE DEMOCRATISATION OF THE LITERARY SYSTEM: A CASE STUDY OF *THE SPANISH LOVE DECEPTION*

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Received: 06-09-2024

Accepted: 20-11-2024

Published: 21-11-2024

Abstract: The digitalisation of literary products, online publishing and distribution services have revolutionised the literary market and shifted power dynamics within the literary system. Self-publishing, as a significant outcome of this transformation, allows authors to bypass traditional gatekeepers, such as publishers, reducing costs and enabling greater autonomy. This article uses Polysystem Theory to analyse the changing roles and powers within the literary system, with a case study of *The Spanish Love Deception* by Elena Armas. Through a qualitative analysis of the novel's publication journey, the study demonstrates how self-publishing has affected traditional gatekeeping but has not completely replaced publishers. Instead, publishers have adapted, using self-published works to identify successful authors and manuscripts, leading to a more collaborative coexistence. The case study analysis builds on what was hinted by previous research and highlights that while digitalisation and self-publishing have shifted the balance of power, they have not destabilised the literary system. Rather, they have democratised gatekeeping, benefiting both consumers and producers. However, the impact of this transformation on literary systems remains uncertain and further research is needed to assess the long-term implications for global publishing dynamics.

Keywords: *Elena Armas; gatekeepers; literary system; Polysystem Theory; self-publishing.*

INTRODUCTION

The introduction of new technologies gave rise to a process of digitalisation of various kinds of information and products with the aim of storing, processing and/or transmitting them (McQuail, 2000). Digitalisation has proved to be valuable in several areas, particularly in the preservation of cultural heritage, as it allowed institutions such as libraries and museums to preserve fragile or perishable materials (Riley-Reid, 2015). The digitalisation of entertainment means such as literary products, and the subsequent introduction of new digital publishing options, such as self-publishing, has led to a reduction in the marginal costs of producing, promoting, storing and distributing literary products (Fürst, 2019; Waldfogel, 2017). These favourable economic and technological conditions led to a broadening of the literary market and its agents, as self-publishing allowed authors to reach consumers without relying on the services and involvement of traditional publishing houses.

Although previous research (see Poletti, 2005; Stinson, 2023; Vadde, 2017),

has highlighted the empowering role of self-publishing for authors there has been limited exploration of how this practice has led to substantial changes in the power relations and roles of the different agents within the literary system. For instance, Aslanov and Mirzagayeva (2022) argued that digitalisation brings about significant social changes and control mechanisms; however, their discussion focuses on the economy, religion, and education rather than the literary system. Stinson (2023) focused more on the literary field, arguing instead that the digital literary sphere challenges traditional notions of authorship, genre and cultural value, prompting a reassessment of what constitutes literature in contemporary society, but does not address the implications of the new redistribution of power within the literary system.

This article aims to offer an overview of the shifting power dynamics within the literary system, illustrated through a critical qualitative analysis of the publication journey of Elena Armas's novel *The Spanish Love Deception*. This case study will serve

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as a lens for examining the evolving landscape of the literary industry, highlighting the challenges and opportunities arising from the democratisation of gatekeeping powers.

The first section of this article will provide a brief insight into self-publishing a key form through which the democratisation of entertainment production has taken shape within the literary system. Polysystem Theory (Even-Zohar, 1978) will serve as a framework to understand the evolving power dynamics and roles within this system.

The second section will then present a case study of the novel *The Spanish Love Deception* by the author Elena Armas as a practical illustration of how shifts in the dynamics of the literary system have manifested in a specific context.

METHOD

Since the beginning of the digitalisation of various sectors of the entertainment industry, such as publishing, cinema and music, there have been numerous conflicting opinions regarding the resulting democratisation of the gatekeeping powers. This section does not seek to provide a detailed analysis of those arguments but to offer a brief insight into self-publishing, one of the many forms in which the democratisation of the production of entertainment means has manifested itself within the literary system. In order to do this, the literary system has been considered as intended by the Polysystem Theory. This theory significantly contributed to the descriptive turn in Translation Studies, offering a transformative framework for the analysis and understanding of language and translation (Pym, 1998). As mentioned, Polysystem Theory will be used here as a framework to explore shifts in the literary system's power dynamics, with a qualitative approach focused on the case study of *The Spanish Love Deception* to illustrate these changes.

The term “polysystem” was introduced by Israeli literary and cultural

theorist Itamar Even-Zohar in the 1970s. Influenced by the late Russian Formalism and Czech Structuralism, he defined a polysystem as an aggregate conjunct of heterogeneous literary and extra-literary systems. Within the theoretical view illustrated by Even-Zohar, the notion of literary system can take on two different interpretations. The first is that of “the network of relations that is hypothesized to obtain between a number of activities called ‘literary’, and consequently these activities themselves observed via that network” (Even-Zohar, 1990, p. 28). Or, alternatively, defined as “the complex of activities, or any section thereof, for which systemic relations can be hypothesized to support the option of considering them ‘literary’” (Even-Zohar, 1990). Moreover, Even-Zohar borrowed the scheme of communication and language elaborated by Jakobson and adapted it to literature in order to better illustrate the factors and activities involved in the literary “(poly)system” (Even-Zohar, 1990):

INSTITUTION [context]
REPERTOIRE [code]
PRODUCER [addresser] -----[addressee] CONSUMER
MARKET [contact/channel]
PRODUCT [message]
(Even-Zohar, 1990, p. 31)

The interrelation between the above factors allows them to function in a hierarchical and fluid manner.

Producers fulfil numerous roles and are conceived of as a plurality of “conditioning and conditioned force[s]” (Even-Zohar, 1990, p. 35) in the literary system, which may include groups and social communities that relate to each other and potential consumers. In this sense, producers also belong to the literary market and institution insofar as they respect and operate a legitimised repertoire—a set of rules, conventions, and resources that shape the production and reception of literary texts within a specific cultural context (Codde, 2003; Even-Zohar, 1990).

Consumers, too, are conceived of as a group, conventionally known as the

“public”, whose role ranges across various activities in the whole system (Even-Zohar, 1990, pp. 36-37).

The term “institution” defines the combination of all the factors and activities related to the preservation of literature as a “socio-cultural activity” (Even-Zohar, 1990, p. 37). Its main role is that of gatekeeping the official culture by holding control of the literary norms and sanctioning those that do not comply with them (Even-Zohar, 1990), but it can also support the creation of new repertoires. As producers and consumers, the institution is also regarded as a heterogeneous and plural conjunct that includes: publishing houses, groups of writers, editors, critics, mass media, government bodies, educational institutions and others (Even-Zohar, 1990). Given its heterogeneous and plural nature, institutions do not operate in a unified manner but struggle to occupy the highest position in the hierarchy of the system and become the establishment (Even-Zohar, 1990).

The “market” consists of all the factors involved in buying and selling literary products and promoting their consumption (Even-Zohar, 1990). Therefore, similarly to the other parts of the literary system, the market is a heterogeneous aggregate of the dynamics involved in the exchange with consumers, and as such, it includes “merchandise-exchange institutions” such as bookshops and libraries (Even-Zohar, 1990). It is essential for the literary system to allow the market to proliferate and expand, as it benefits the development of the socio-cultural activity of literature (Even-Zohar, 1990, p. 39).

The term “repertoire” defines the set of rules and models considered legitimate by the dominant circle of the system that regulates the production and consumption of literary products. Moreover, the repertoire can be “canonised” or “non-canonised” depending on the status of its interrelation with other parts of the system. The “product” of the literary system is not necessarily limited to cultural artefacts and

the notion of “texts”, as these are only a partial expression of literature. Thus, products include “any performed set of signs”, activities and behaviours as well as their outcome, thus utterances, texts, images and events (Codde, 2003, p.100; Even-Zohar, 1990, p. 43). Products can enter the system through static canonicity, via the literary canon as pieces of literature which will be preserved, or through dynamic canonicity via a model of the repertoire (Even-Zohar, 1990).

Building on the Polysystem Theory, Lefevere (1992/2017) argued that the literary system is controlled by two groups. The first one is represented by the professionals of the literary system, such as critics, reviewers, academics and translators. The second group is the patronage outside the system composed of influential individuals, institutions and groups such as publishers and mass media. Both groups are cultural gatekeepers inasmuch as they have the power to define the dominant repertoire or poetics and even influence the ideology of the system (Munday, 2016).

Thus, the struggle for control between the various hierarchical layers and groups of the polysystem determines the moving force for its natural change or evolution (Even-Zohar, 1990). Changes in the literary system may not necessarily depend entirely on internal or external factors, as both can contribute to them. Literary production can change to reflect the socio-historical evolution of the world, but such changes need the legitimisation of the literary system. In this regard, Even-Zohar precisely noted that the gatekeeping roles have loosened, and in modern times, fashions and conventions are established by “mass media and their celebrities, highly respected critics and others” (1990, p. 210).

Self-publishing in the “golden age” of the literary system

As stated before, products can enter the literary system in two ways: through dynamic or static canonicity. However, it is possible to assume the existence of a third

way that combines the two. Nowadays, literary products may observe established literary conventions, and thus be static, but at the same time not adhere to canonised production models, and thus be dynamic. The combination of these two modes is perfectly embodied by self-published literary products in the current era of digitalised literature.

As Waldfogel argues, digitalisation has ushered in a “golden age” (2017, pp. 196, 210) for both consumers and the entertainment system, marked by a significant increase in both the number of available products and the size of the audience. As a result, the literary market has been transformed, leading to shifts in roles and hierarchies within the literary system, along with changes to its appointed agents of control—namely, the gatekeepers.

Since 2007, the widespread use of e-books –also known as digital books (Baga, 2023)– and digitalisation allowed to reduce the costs of production, promotion, storage and distribution of literary products (Fürst, 2019; Waldfogel, 2017). These favourable economic and technological conditions led to a broadening of both the market and the group of producers at the apparent expense of traditional gatekeepers. An increasing number of creators (henceforth referred to as authors) resort to self-publishing to bypass traditional gatekeepers and release their products directly into the literary market (Waldfogel, 2017). In this sense, self-publishing could be defined as an “antiauthoritarian” practice (Nehring, 1993 as cited in Poletti, 2005, p. 186). However, this definition is both broad and reductive, as self-publishing is part of a larger context and subculture of empowering independent practices that foster the creation of independent media (Fürst, 2019; Poletti, 2005; Vadde, 2017). In this context, while Brown (2021) advocates for the pedagogical benefits of self-published literature—highlighting its role in amplifying marginalised voices and critiquing publishing practices—her analysis does not address the broader effects of self-

publishing on the literary system as a whole.

According to the data from a 2017 Author Earnings report (Alliance of Independent Authors, 2022; Association of American Publishers, 2015; Phalen & Harris, 2017), publishers lost a remarkable amount of power in the market as authors began to claim it for themselves through self-published literary products. This appears to fulfil one of the main negative predictions about digitalisation, which viewed it as a threat to the stability of the literary system and its power structures. However, rather than collapsing, the literary system has thrived with the beneficial introduction of self-published literary products. As Even-Zohar (1990) theorised and as previously discussed, the system is at risk only when change occurs without control or proper management—not simply when those in power feel their positions or authority are threatened.

Before digitalisation and self-publishing, authors who wished to have their works published had to go through gatekeepers. They needed to secure a literary agent, who would then submit their manuscript to an editor at a publishing house, ultimately deciding whether it was worthy of publication. In many cases, this process led to rejection at various stages. The role of gatekeepers in evaluating literary products has been shown to be flawed, both in terms of quality and commercial potential. A notable example is the *Harry Potter* series, which was rejected by twelve publishers before being accepted and published by Bloomsbury in 1997 (Hviid et al., 2016). Such flawed gatekeeping has had detrimental consequences for the market, consumers, and authors, leading to a monopoly and a narrowing of the range of available products (Hviid et al., 2016; Waldfogel, 2017).

As predicted by Lessig (2008) and later noted by Murray (2015), the “free culture” represented by self-published products has democratised the monopoly once held by gatekeepers and professionals. Digitalisation has shifted the balance of

power within the literary system. Today, thanks to technological advancements, authors who have been rejected by publishers or who wish to publish independently can do so using online platforms such as Amazon, Apple, Author Solutions, BookBaby, Draft2Digital, CreateSpace, Inscribe Digital, Lulu, NookPress, Scribd, and Smashwords (Hviid et al., 2016; Poletti, 2005; Vadde, 2021; Waldfogel, 2015).

Thanks to the accessibility and ease of use of online platforms, along with the reduced marginal costs of production and distribution, self-publishing has democratized the literary system. This shift has allowed the creative world to move beyond traditional publication procedures, enabling consumers to access a broader and more diverse range of products at lower prices (Fürst, 2019, p. 484). As a result, self-published literary products have rapidly gained a significant share of the literary market. Since 2011, they have also appeared on bestseller lists (Phalen & Harris, 2017; Waldfogel, 2017; Waldfogel & Reimers, 2015). According to data from Author Earnings reports, the market share of self-published works rose to 43%, matching that of the “Big 5”—the leading traditional publishers (Hviid et al., 2016).

The growing importance of self-publishing within the literary system may have led some to believe that the system was on the brink of collapse. However, as previously noted, the literary system and its key agents have instead adapted to the shifts in hierarchy and power dynamics brought about by digitalisation. In fact, as reported by the Association of American Publishers in 2015, publishers responded to the changing market by investing in technologies that provided digital alternatives to traditional printed books, which were no longer the dominant product in consumer demand (Phalen & Harris, 2017). Moreover, the shift in the balance of power within the literary system is not absolute. Authors occupy a hybrid position, allowing them to navigate between self-

publishing and traditional publishing practices (Laquintano 2016; Shumake, 2017). This coexistence is evidenced, albeit reluctantly, by Hviid et al. (2016) in their analysis of the rise of self-publishing. They demonstrate that self-published authors and traditional gatekeepers can, in fact, coexist and even cooperate within the literary system. One strategy publishers can use to ensure their literary products are well-received by consumers is to enhance the qualitative assessment and scrutiny of the manuscripts submitted to them (Hviid et al, 2016). A second, more relevant strategy is for publishers to adopt a “Wait-and-See” approach. This involves carefully monitoring the self-published products in the literary market and selecting the most successful ones for publication (Hviid et al, 2016). In this context, Pâquet argues that publishers treat the market of self-published products as a “slush-pile” from which they identify new products and authors who can bring them success (2021, p.12). The latter strategy reflects the current behaviour of publishers in the literary market, as a significant number of successful literary products were initially self-published before being picked up for traditional publication (Pâquet, 2021; Waldfogel and Reimers, 2015). This could result in a significant shift in the literary market, where the majority of traditionally published works would originate not from unpublished manuscripts, but from self-published products (Hviid et al., 2016).

Self-publishing might be considered a reaction to the limitations imposed by gatekeepers, but it is not necessarily an act of rebellion against them. While it challenges and competes with traditional publishers, it represents an innovative approach to publishing. This approach can legitimise authors who choose it, positioning them as rightful participants in the literary system, while also benefiting consumers (Fürst, 2019; Stinson 2023). The next section will explore this topic more pragmatically, using the case study of the novel *The Spanish Love Deception*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A case study: The Spanish Love Deception

Introduction

The qualitative analysis of the publication journey of the case study novel presented below is based on a selection of several notable works that exemplify the shifting power dynamics within the literary system. These works were chosen through a careful examination of best-seller lists, particularly those from *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and Amazon, covering the period between 2020 and 2021. In addition, book deal announcements, especially those reported in *Publishers Weekly*, were considered.

The following novels were initially considered for this analysis: *The Plated Prisoner* series by Raven Kennedy, *A Touch of Darkness* by Scarlett St. Clair, *The Atlas Six* by Olivie Blake, *The Never After* series by Emily McIntire, *The Devil's Night* series by Penelope Douglas, *All Rhodes Lead Here*, *Kulti*, *The Wall of Winnipeg and Me* by Mariana Zapata, and *The Four Horsemen* series by Laura Thalassa. However, the impact and relevance of these works to the literary system did not match the significance of the novel ultimately selected for this case study.

The romance novel *The Spanish Love Deception* has had a unique publishing journey, which has enabled it to successfully enter the literary system. It serves as a compelling case study for examining the evolution of the literary industry, particularly in the context of the increasing democratisation of gatekeeping powers. In the following section, the publication journey of this novel will be analysed qualitatively using the framework of Polysystem Theory, highlighting the changes in power dynamics within the literary system.

The self-publishing journey of The Spanish Love Deception

Elena Armas independently published *The Spanish Love Deception* on February 23,

2021, via Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) platform. KDP enables authors to publish their works autonomously, without the constraints or support of traditional publishers. Since its launch in 2016, Amazon has offered authors the opportunity to sell their works in both hardback and paperback formats through its print-on-demand (POD) service. As suggested by its name, POD prints books only when they are ordered, providing a more cost-effective and environmentally sustainable solution compared to traditional offset printing methods (Phalen and Harris, 2017). It should be noted, however, that KDP's terms require that the digital version of the book be sold exclusively through the Amazon platform (Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, 2024; Nelson, 2015). Authors who opt for this service also have the option to make their work available through Kindle Unlimited, a subscription service for readers.

For independent authors, self-publishing via platforms like KDP offers both advantages and challenges. On one hand, authors retain full control over the content, the publishing process, and the financial outcomes. On the other hand, they forgo the strategic support that traditional publishers typically offer, including services such as editing, formatting, and, crucially, marketing (Phalen and Harris, 2017). Furthermore, the exclusivity required for digital versions of books on Amazon limits the potential readership, as the books are only available in Kindle format, accessible through Kindle devices or the Kindle app.

By opting to self-publish her novel, Armas assumed control over the publishing process, bypassing the traditional constraints imposed by gatekeepers. However, this decision also meant forgoing the support typically provided by a traditional publisher. Although Armas lacked the backing of a traditional publisher, she did receive significant technical and creative support from an international bestselling author (Armas, 2021a). To ensure the quality of the novel, he had the manuscript edited by

Jovana Shirly, an independent professional editor. Despite these efforts, Armas did not have the extensive readership or the professional marketing strategy that a traditional publisher would have provided. Consequently, she did not anticipate the considerable success and resonance her debut novel had.

To promote the novel and generate anticipation prior to its release, Armas employed a strategy theoretically recommended by Hess R. (as cited in Phalen and Harris, 2017), utilizing social media platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok. This approach exemplifies the shift described by Even-Zohar (1990) illustrated in the sections above, who noted that in modern literary landscape, trends and conventions are shaped by a broader range of influencers, that include “mass media, celebrities, respected critics, and others” (Even-Zohar, 1990, p. 210). In line with this shift, Armas turned to influential bloggers and public figures, often referred to as “influencers,” whose content focused on books. These individuals are commonly known as “Bookstagrammers” on Instagram and “BookTokers” on TikTok, depending on the platform they use. Prior to the publication date, Armas distributed advanced reader copies (ARCs) of *The Spanish Love Deception* to a select group of influencers, encouraging them to review the novel on their platforms. As a result of the interest and attention generated by the influencers who received an ARC from the author, *The Spanish Love Deception* entered the Amazon Top 100 bestseller list on July 8, 2021 (Armas, 2021b).

Transition to traditional publishing and mainstream success

The remarkable success of *The Spanish Love Deception* led to its discovery by literary agent Jessica Watterson of the Sandra Dijkstra Literary Agency (Publishers Weekly, 2022). This success also drew the attention of several major publishers that saw in the novel economic potential to be exploited, leading to an auction for the

publishing rights to both *The Spanish Love Deception* and its companion novel, *The American Roommate Experiment*. In August 2021, editor Kaitlin Olson of Atria acquired the rights to both novels. Subsequently, the independently published version of the novel was removed from sale as Simon & Schuster released its new edition for the Australian and European markets on October 28, 2021. This edition included slight revisions to some elements of the “peritext”—the paratextual material surrounding the text that guides its interpretation, such as the title, author's name, prefaces, and footnotes (Genette, 1997) Atria then released a new printed version of the novel for the American market on February 8 2022 with similar revisions at both the textual level and peritextual levels.

The acquisition of *The Spanish Love Deception* by one of the largest American publishers, such as Simon & Schuster, significantly expanded its audience and allowed for a broadening of the audience. Readers could access the novel in various formats and through different platforms, rather than only through Amazon. As a result, the novel had sold approximately 17,000 copies by February 18, 2022, according to Publishers Weekly (Milliot, 2022). It also entered the trade paper front list on February 21, 2022, and, despite some understandable fluctuations over time, remained on the list for 23 consecutive weeks. The Italian publisher Newton Compton Editori (2022; Armas, 2022b) reported that, within the first few weeks of its U.S. publication, the novel had sold more than 300,000 copies. Additionally, *The Spanish Love Deception* was nominated for the Goodreads Choice Award for Best Romance of the Year 2021 (Goodreads, 2021) and subsequently awarded the category of Best Debut Novel of the Year. This success propelled Armas to the ranks of New York Times Best Sellers and USA Today bestselling authors, with her novel appearing on these prestigious lists on February 17 and 27, 2022, respectively (The

New York Times, 2022; Trade Paper Frontlist, 2022; USA Today, 2022).

The commercial success of *The Spanish Love Deception* also led to the acquisition of translation rights for thirty-three languages (Armas, 2022c). Furthermore, on June 16, 2022, Armas announced that the film rights had been acquired by BCDF Pictures, which had co-produced the 2021 adaptation of *The Hating Game* by USA Today bestselling author Sally Thorne (Gobar, 2022).

As previously discussed, the case of *The Spanish Love Deception* exemplifies the shift in power within the literary system and provides strong evidence for the theoretical propositions put forth by Hviid et al. (2016), Pâquet (2021) and Stinson (2023). It highlights the growing trend within the publishing industry toward democratizing the market and literary system. However, it is important to note that this is merely one example of a broader trend in which publishers have increasingly turned their attention to independent authors and social media communities, such as the TikTok book community, known as “BookTok.” As argued at the beginning of this section, several other self-published literary products have similarly drawn attention and been acquired by notable publishers were worthy of notice as they have been acquired by various notable publishers following their initial success as independent media.

CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the publication journey of the novel *The Spanish Love Deception*, this article has briefly shown how digitalisation has significantly transformed the literary system. To contextualise these changes in power dynamics, the analysis drew on Polysystem Theory, which views the literary system as a hierarchical system controlled by cultural gatekeepers—key figures who shape what enters the literary sphere. Publishers historically held this gatekeeping role, exercising near-total control over which works were published and, thereby, granted

entry into the literary system. With the advent of digital technologies, however, entertainment mediums, including literature, have undergone a profound digitalisation. Reduced marginal costs have made digital publishing options, such as self-publishing, accessible to authors, allowing them to bypass traditional gatekeepers and publish their products freely. It is clear that digitalisation and self-publishing have had a significant impact on the literary system as they allowed the democratisation of its gatekeeping powers, resulting in a transformation that has led to a “golden age” for both consumers and the literary system (Fürst, 2019, p. 48; Waldfogel, 2017, p.199, 200, 210). While this shift might appear to destabilize the system’s traditional power structures, Polysystem Theory suggests that change is only threatening if uncontrolled; a redistribution of power need not imply a breakdown of stability (Even-Zohar, 1990). The change produced by digitalisation and self-publishing has not been absolute and has not completely removed the power of the gatekeepers. Notably, publishers remain influential and have adapted to this transformed landscape. They have improved the evaluation processes for submitted manuscripts and actively monitor trends in self-published works to identify authors and titles likely to succeed (Hviid et al., 2016; Pâquet, 2021). The case of *The Spanish Love Deception* by Elena Armas exemplifies this evolving dynamic, as the novel initially entered the literary system through self-publishing before being acquired by a major publisher.

Given the specific focus of this article, it is not yet possible to determine whether the implications of self-publishing on the redistribution of power within other literary systems will align with the international trends observed in English-language literary products, from which the selected corpus belonged. It thus follows that further research is required on this matter. Particularly in light of studies by Lessig (2008) and Vadde (2021), which emphasize the potential long-term effects of

democratising entertainment on power dynamics within the literary system. Additionally, as Vadde (2021) highlights, it is essential to examine how digital platforms influence authorship, community formation, and the circulation of literary works.

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