



THE CHIVALRIC ROMANCE IN THE AGE OF ITS NEOLIBERAL REPRODUCIBILITY: THE *ORLANDO FURIOSO* TRANSCODIFIED IN MARVEL'S *IRON MAN* SAGA

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ABSTRACT

This article reads the literary genre of chivalric romance—those prose or verse narratives popular in the courts of Early Modern Europe recounting the heroic deeds of knights-errant—as a code: a model for communicating a set of cultural values and socio-political anxieties by using genre-specific topoi and modes of storytelling. Specifically, this analysis investigates the transcoding of this code from its original contextual specificity to the twenty-first century, with a particular focus on contemporary US neoliberal society. Indeed, this essay interprets Marvel's *Iron Man* saga, including the Avengers' chapters, as an instance of the latest stage of American exceptionalism, here understood as imbricated in the neoliberal society. This reading is built upon the hypothesis that the Avengers' adventures may be viewed as a twenty-first century adaptation of the chivalric romance as developed in Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, both in narrative and ideological terms. The *Iron Man* saga is representative of and conducive to the American contemporary political set of values as the latest developments of the chivalric romance were of and to the Renaissance sensitivity in the courts of Northern Italy. A key facet of this interpretation lies in the realization that technological reproducibility is a crucial aspect of the story and the characterization of the *Orlando Furioso* as well as of the *Iron Man* saga and its neoliberal basis.

Keywords: superhero, MCU, Ludovico Ariosto, chivalric romance, Renaissance, Avengers.

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1. EXCEPTIONAL (SUPER)HEROES

This article interprets Marvel's *Iron Man* saga, including the Avengers' chapters, as a particularly interesting instance of the latest stage of American exceptionalism, here understood as imbricated in the neoliberal society. This reading is built upon the hypothesis that the Avengers' adventures may be viewed as a twenty-first century adaptation of the chivalric romance and of the knights' quests, both in narrative and ideological terms. The *Iron Man* saga is representative of and conducive to the American contemporary political set of values as the latest developments of the chivalric romance were of and to the Renaissance sensitivity in the courts of Northern Italy. A key facet of this interpretation lies

in the realization that technological reproducibility is a crucial aspect of the story and the characterization of the *Orlando Furioso* as well as of the *Iron Man* saga and its neoliberal basis, as I will show in what follows. By neoliberalism, I refer to the “theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (Harvey 2005, 2)—an apparatus which may be applied to the *Iron Man* movies both in their form and content.¹

Hence, this intervention considers the hermeneutic possibility of reading the literary genre of chivalric romance—those prose or verse narratives popular in the courts of Early Modern Europe recounting the heroic deeds of knights-errant—as a code: a model for communicating a set of cultural values and socio-political anxieties by using genre-specific topoi and modes of storytelling. Shifting the paradigm of chivalric romance from literary genre to code implies raising questions about its trans-historical trajectory and its present applicability, while also looking at the intercultural dynamics defining its transcodification from a contextual specificity to another. Specifically, my analysis investigates the transcodification of the code of the chivalric romance from its original contextual specificity, Early Modern Italy, to the twenty-first century, with a particular focus on contemporary US neoliberal society. I here argue that Marvel’s *Iron Man* cinematic saga—with its epic battles between good and evil forces, the glorious deeds of national (super)heroes, the marvel-filled adventures taking spectators to fantastic places, and the quests validating or compensating for political and moral principles—presents a stylistic and narrative construction, as well as content and rhetorical modes, typical of the chivalric romance. I will draw upon some lessons from Ludovico Ariosto’s classic *Orlando Furioso* (1532)² as the apex of the chivalric tradition, a text synthesizing the normative and post-normative drives inbred in this code (Zatti 2006, 13), in order to read the *Iron Man* cinematic saga (begun in 2008 with *Iron Man* and concluded in 2019 with *Avengers: Endgame*) as a chivalric narrative conveying political imaginaries and ethical conundrums pertinent to neoliberal societies.

Dating back to the eleventh century *chanson de geste*, the medieval chivalric romance grew more and more popular in France, England, Spain, and Italy. Adhering to the political and social values of the Early Middle Ages, it reached its apex in the sixteenth

¹ This article will take into consideration only the movies of the *Iron Man* saga, excluding from its analysis the original comics. Unfortunately, there is no space in this venue to address the transcodification from the original comics to the cinematic universe.

² The 1532 edition of the *Orlando Furioso* is the latest and the most complete (the first appeared in 1516, the second in 1521). Ariosto explicitly declared he was inspired by Matteo Maria Boiardo’s *Orlando Innamorato* (1495), a further element of intertextuality of the text.

century in the Renaissance period with the *Orlando Furioso*.³ The subsequent chivalric poems, such as Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581) and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590) marked instead an important shift in structure and style, dismissing the confusion of the romance and its multiple plots, in favor of the Aristotelian unitary logic of the epic. Ariosto found himself heir to a vast literary corpus and a complex tradition that by his time was simultaneously at its climax and in crisis, an intertextual condition of in-betweenness that reflects the historical and political transformations of the European *Cinquecento* (Stoppino 2012, 20–21): the introduction of the movable type printing system in 1450 revolutionized literature and its circulation, the Reformation split Christianity into the English Church and the Roman Catholic Church, the subsequent Counter-Reformation exercised a strict control especially over Italian cultural products, the *Umanesimo* reinvigorated the study of the past expanding the understanding of time to comprehend the future as well. The general intellectual efflorescence of the Renaissance upturned medieval cultural codes and introduced modern models capable of addressing the transformed socio-political context and its new sensibilities. Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* accounts for this time of revolutions, expressing a self-conscious synthesis of ancient and modern narrative possibilities and shaping a distinct chivalric code, one uniting the stylistic plurality of the romance with the teleological scheme and the unifying drive of the epic—a poetics of “harmony and dissonance” interlacing a “poetry of crisis” (Ascoli 2016, 6). The *Orlando Furioso* assimilates the passage of the chivalric code from romance to epic as a symptom of the historical passage from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period: it is a narrative on and of the threshold.

Similarly, the *Iron Man* saga looks back on the long superhero tradition of American comics. Born in 1938 with the creation of Superman which inaugurated the Golden Age of Comics, it then went through a Silver and a Bronze Age, till the Modern Age also known as the Dark Age of Comic Books. While the latter phases challenged the one-dimensional construction of heroes and villains, problematizing the characters and the readers' understanding of the role of the superhero in contemporary societies, the late 1990s and the early 2000s saw also a decline in the sales of comic books and in the readers' interest in Marvel's superheroes.⁴ Against this background, Marvel cinematic universe released *Iron Man* in 2008, inaugurating the record-breaking *Infinity Saga* (of which *Iron Man* is a

³ Consider, for example, the publishing success of the *Orlando Furioso*, which became a best-seller in the sixteenth century. See Daniel Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic: The Canonization of Orlando Furioso*, pp. 10–20.

⁴ Marvel Entertainment Group, founded in 1989, lost many talented comic-book writers and artists, registered a decline in quality and the fans started boycotting their products. In 1996, the M.E.G. filed for bankruptcy (Schulman 2023).

segment).⁵ As in the case of the *Orlando Furioso*, the *Iron Man* saga is framed within a generic repositioning and its culmination in a new form, on the threshold of a new cultural code. In terms of content, *Iron Man* mirrors the geopolitical and social transformations of our times, addressing themes such as post-9/11 US foreign policy, the security state, a rapidly changing world order after the end of the Cold War, international terrorism, and the ecological crisis.

Think, for instance, of the opening scene: Tony Stark flies to Afghanistan via Bagram Air Base—a site which is associated with the War on Terror, because it is “where the Bush administration incarcerated those they elected to describe as ‘unlawful enemy combatants’ rather than ‘prisoners of war’ in order to abrogate their rights” (McSweeney 2018, 47)—to demonstrate the Stark Industry “Freedom Line” and elaborate on the destructive potential of these weapons as crucial to defeating the “bad guys.” By quoting President Bush’s post-9/11 rhetoric of the good vs. the bad forces,⁶ Tony Stark mobilizes a semantics which is ideologically charged and very familiar to the American as well as international spectatorship of the movie. As the plot unfolds this clear-cut distinction will become looser, introducing elements and actions which complicate the identification of the good and the evil sides, especially considering that the main antagonist of the film is Obadiah Stane, Stark’s business partner. In the *Orlando furioso* too the fight between the heroes and the villains is problematized by the recurrent non-solution of the duels which enables indecisions and ambiguities within the ideological horizon of the narrative (Jossa 2000, 32). In this regard, the text accounts for the partial reconsideration of the contemporary set of political and moral principles, introducing a post-normative turn into the normative structure of the romance. The actions take place within the contemporary normative framework of the war between the Christians and the Saracens, yet its solution is never definite and leaves space for individual conversions and shared intents, in a way which post-normatively rewrites the relationship between the two parties. Similarly to the *Orlando furioso*, hence, *Iron Man* accounts for a kind of cultural crisis by resorting to a chivalric code that has changed both in form and content: the film adaptations of the

⁵ Marvel Studios was founded in 1996 and sold the rights to Spider-Man to Sony for seven million dollars. The first movie with Tobey Maguire was released in 2002 and was a great success, grossing more than eight hundred million dollars worldwide. Marvel’s economic crisis was finally over through its repositioning into the cinema industry (WIPO 2012). Collectively, Marvel Cinematic Universe (including other movies besides the *Infinity Saga*) has “grossed more than twenty-nine billion dollars, making the franchise the most successful in entertainment history” (Schulman 2023).

⁶ In his remarks at the National Prayer Service, held on September 14, 2001 and attended by former presidents and members of Congress, President Bush shifted the symbolic focus of the ceremony from the past of the attacks to the future of the US response: “Americans do not yet have the distance of history, but our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of *evil*” (Bush 2001, emphasis added).

stories from the comics are both pluralistic (as prescribed by the tradition of the romance) and teleologically determined as in epics, while the plot includes both normative and post-normative elements introducing modern models capable of addressing the post-9/11 socio-political context and neoliberal sensibilities.⁷

In this sense, in the twenty-first century the chivalric romance remains a popular and culturally relevant genre of which Marvel's *Iron Man* is a particularly convincing expression. In his ideological reading of romance, Fredric Jameson refers to it "as a particular type of literary discourse not bound to the conventions of a given age, ... but as a mode of expression across a whole range of historical periods ... and wholly altered historical circumstances" (1975, 142). Once established the persistence of romance as a mode, Jameson goes on raising questions about the narrative elements that would replace the constituents of the medieval romance that were linked to the contemporary socioeconomic environment, such as magic. It may be argued that, in the language of superhero comics, magic is called superpower and is still very much present, its purpose and scope being even more politicized, and, in some cases, taking the shape of highly developed technologies. Magic, transposed into sci-fi inventions, remains a fundamental mechanism in the narrative economy of the twenty-first century chivalric romance.

In his seminal *Anatomy of Criticism* (1953), Northrop Frye reflects on some key features of romance in terms that can be ascribed to Iron Man and his adventures as well: "the hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world. The conflict, however, takes place in, or at any rate primarily concerns, our world" (1990, 187). As a kind of Messiah, the hero of the medieval romance is he who by his own deeds "is responsible for the regeneration and transfiguration of the fallen world" (Jameson 1975, 139)—this is comparable to what Iron Man, Captain America, and the other Avengers do when they fight off enemies who threaten or have endangered our world. The Avengers can be seen as belonging to an "upper world," be it US upper class as for Iron Man, a highly sophisticated scientific laboratory as in the case of Captain America, or planet Asgard for the god Thor. Although in the majority of cases their human counterparts come from lower-middle class backgrounds (with Tony Stark being quite an exception), in general, all superheroes originate from exceptional circumstances that make them distinct from and super-human, that is superior to other beings. Conversely, Thanos (the supervillain of *Avengers Infinity War* and *Endgame*) comes from Titan, an over-populated planet hit by a social cataclysm where he saw people starving to death. This recognition led him to his genocidal plan to wipe out half of the population of the universe to keep in

⁷ In this article I will refer to the *Orlando Furioso* both as an epic and as chivalric romance. This is so because Ariosto's text lies in-between these two genres, as Sergio Zatti points out in the chapter "The Furioso between Epos and Romance," of his study *The Quest for Epic. From Ariosto to Tasso* (2006).

check its overall supply of natural resources and guarantee a decent quality of life to all living beings—a goal that he finally achieves in *Infinity War*. Thanos’ origins, hence, are not exceptional in positive terms: it is the fact that poverty was the most common experience on his planet (as on other planets) that turns him into an exceptionally powerful villain. In an exchange in *Infinity War*, Thanos explains his reasons to one of the Avengers, Doctor Strange:

“Titan was like most planets; too many mouths, not enough to go around. And when we faced extinction, I offered a solution.”

“Genocide.”

“But random. Dispassionate, fair to rich and poor alike. They called me a madman. And what I predicted came to pass.” (*Infinity War*, 2018)

Titan would be subsequently devastated and rendered nearly inhabitable, leading to the extinction of its population. In-between the upper worlds of the Avengers and the lower world of Thanos, there is our world which serves as one of the stages of the epic conflict between good and evil forces. As noticed by Jameson, the conceptual opposition between good and evil is the most important organizational category informing the chivalric romance. In *Iron Man* this opposition becomes mythical in that ideological and moral dimensions meet the narrative necessities; the multiple story lines and different films of the Avengers converge on one quest, the one battle they all share: reconstituting the *status quo* of our universe after Thanos’ success in wiping out half of all life in the universe.

The exceptional circumstances from which superheroes originate and against which they fight cannot but resonate with the rhetoric of the American exceptionalism. These exceptional beings, who feel entitled to (re)establish the *status quo* once it has been disrupted, operate within “the irreconcilable rifts within U.S. political culture that opened up during the lengthy period of transition from the termination of the cold war to the inauguration of the Global War on Terror, and with the disparate state fantasies that emerged to organize U.S. citizens’ relations to these antagonisms” (Pease 2013, 300). According to Donald Pease, this is the site where a new phase of American exceptionalism emerged as “the dominant structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagined their national identity” (ibid). Crucially, this ideological construction of national identity is designed on the basis of violence, constantly denied and yet, in so doing, also unveiled: American exceptionalism “not only disavowed the violence intrinsic in its logic, but also, in so doing, exposed ... the mechanism—intrinsic to the ‘exceptionalism’ of American exceptionalism—that justified that violence” (300). Since their progressive release starting from 2008, the *Infinity Saga* movies position themselves within “the dominant structure” of the US post-9/11 identity, referencing on more than one occasion the War on Terror and other crucial issues of this period, and also proposing an ideological transition to a more complex model. In light of these considerations, not only the superheroes’ physical but also political capacities seem to be exceptional: their use of force is extraordinary and

exceptionally justified by the exceptionalist logic of protecting a community (human-kind? The US? Neoliberal society? Half of the population of the universe?) by singling out and fighting evil groups (such as Thanos' Black Order) which pose actual threats and are representatives of opposite principles.

Along these lines, one may interpret the Avengers' exceptional and exceptionalist deeds as iterations of what David Quint, in his study of the intertwining between epic and empire, calls the "apologetic propaganda" transforming the recent past into occasions propelling "war[s] of foreign conquest," which is peculiar to the chivalric code (1989, 3). Ariosto's knights and the Avengers share the same expansionist ideology; the narrative of which they are protagonists projects a distinct and coherent world through a "plot that presents a whole with its linked beginning, middle, and end," and this form "speaks for the completeness of its vision of history: telling a full story, [it] claims to possess *the* full story" (14). Possessing the full story, a one-sided understanding of the world as divided in good and evil spheres is crucial to Ariosto's Christian paladins who oppose the Saracen army as it is to the Avengers fighting against Afghan terrorist groups, competing weapon manufacturers, or alien invasions. The dominant fantasy is the same for both groups of warriors: the protection of the "empire" they are an expression of.

And yet the ambiguous understanding and employment of violence is a key question in these chivalric narratives, both in the philosophical dimension and in the practical one. The plot of the *Orlando Furioso* is centered on the continuous deferral of duels and, in general, of violent acts (Stroppa 2021, 100); this narrative strategy de-centers and multiplies the focus of the story while also distancing it (in temporal as well as critical terms) from the representation of force. Consider, for instance, the first duel depicted, that between Rinaldo and Ferraù who fight against each other over Angelica's love only to subsequently abandon the battle and join forces to chase her—one violent iteration (their animosity) is resolved into another, more radically violent pursuit: taking Angelica against her will. In this sense, violence is deferred to be more broadly diffused over the poem, it is excepted only to be made exceptional, as exceptional is the (violent) quest of Angelica upon which the whole narrative is developed. The crucial point in their encounter turning duel turning joint venture is the promptness with which they put the romantic/sexual intent to physically conquer Angelica in the first place, while setting aside the political/religious motive which positions them on the two opposing sides of the narrative frame. The violence they represent and perform is, thus, doubly exceptional: on the one hand because it transcends the ideological premises of the story producing and inhabiting a rift within which the two factions upturn the dominant structure of the plot; on the other, because this new model reassesses the ethical contours of the idea of violence by suspending it (in the duel) and redirecting it toward a shared object of desire (Angelica).

19

Disse al pagan:—Me sol creduto avrai,
e pur avrai te meco ancora offeso:
se questo avvien perché i fulgenti rai
del nuovo sol t’abbino il petto acceso,
di farmi qui tardar che guadagno hai?
che quando ancor tu m’abbi morto o preso,
non però tua la bella donna fia;
che, mentre noi tardiam, se ne va via.

[...]

21

Al pagan la proposta non dispiacque:
così fu differita la tenzone;
e tal tregua tra lor subito nacque,
sì l’odio e l’ira va in oblivione,
che ’l pagano al partir da le fresche acque
non lasciò a piedi il buon figliuol d’Amone:
con preghi invita, ed al fin toglie in groppa,
e per l’orme d’Angelica galoppa.

(Ariosto 1964, *I*, 19; 21)

While the two knights fight, Angelica flees and the two agree on leaving their rancor aside and go after her together, riding the same horse. Crucially, this transition from one kind of violence to another is signaled and critiqued by the third person narrator who comments on it with ironic remarks:

22

Oh gran bontà de’ cavallieri antiqui!
Eran rivali, eran di fé diversi,
e si sentian degli aspri colpi iniqui
per tutta la persona anco dolersi;
e pur per selve oscure e calli obliqui
insieme van senza sospetto aversi.
Da quattro sproni il destrier punto arriva
ove una strada in due si dipartiva.

(*I*, 22)

The reference to the generosity of the nights of the ancient days (“Oh gran bontà de’ cavallieri antiqui!”) is obviously ironic, pointing out the deferral of the duel as a different iteration of a similar ideological/hierarchical subjugation (Christians against Muslims, men against women).⁸ This suspension of the violence is not so generous, in the end, but

⁸ For a thorough analysis of the importance of irony in the *Furioso*, see Zatti 2006, 14.

the very fact that it is, ultimately, only fictitious enables a self-aware critique of the use of force and of the concept of justice within the narrative, as it happens, in different terms, within the Avengers' team.

Since they physically fight against the villains, the Avengers too occasionally feel compelled to resort to ironic remarks to restate their position on the side of justice. For instance, in *Captain America, Winter Soldier* (2014) Falcon asks: "How do we know the good guys from the bad guys?" to which Captain America replies with nothing but self-evident terms: "If they're shooting at you, they're bad." In *Ant-Man* (2015) somebody who happens to be helping in a fight asks the Ant Man: "Hey we're the good guys, right?" "Yes, we're the good guys" he assures, "It feels kind of weird you know..." the man replies. Tony Stark describing the Avengers says: "That's what we call ourselves. We're sort of like a team. Earth's Mightiest Heroes-type thing"—but before joining the group he periodically described them as "a super-secret boy band." The clear-cut opposition between good guys and bad guys is continuously questioned and renewed by comments of this kind and would eventually cease to be so definite in *Captain American, Civil War* (2016) when the Avengers split into two teams over the necessity for a system of accountability for superheroes. In the *Infinity Saga*, hence, superheroes do stand by the chivalric romance code but, as in the *Orlando Furioso*, most knights lack the one-dimensional nature and absolute moral stature of the classical epic hero.⁹ Tony Stark's remark about the "super-secret boy band" seems to play into the same ironic field as the comment about the generosity of the ancient knights: the exceptionality of the heroes is brought about in the form of self-conscious parody, yet it is exhibited nonetheless. Against this background, the use of irony in the chivalric code and its super heroic transcoding seems to be exceptional itself: it depicts the exceptional deeds of exceptional heroes while also accounting for their exceptional ideological positionality in a possibly critical tone. The ironic reconception of the knights' deeds through comic actions (the Christian knight and the Saracen riding the same horse, the Avengers trying and failing to lift Thor's hammer) and self-mocking remarks introduces a space of self-critique in the chivalric code, one which may raise questions about the knights' and superheroes' roles and their relationship to justice.

⁹ Think of the Orlando of the title: he loses his mind when he falls in love with Angelica, a particularly unheroic accident. His mental de-evolution over the poem renegotiates the contours of his heroic figure, thus allowing Ariosto the possibility to explore dissonance in the narrative code he employs, and to integrate psychologically nuanced features into his chivalric heroes. Besides Orlando, also other heroes are presented as more developed and problematized, in brief, as more modern.

2. THE AGE OF NEOLIBERAL REPRODUCIBILITY

As in the examples quoted above from the *Infinity Saga*, self-consciousness is often conveyed through irony, in Marvel cinematic universe as in the *Orlando Furioso*. In both cases ironic remarks serve also as metafictional reflections on the semantic codes the heroes and superheroes inhabit. This is so because irony showcases the maturity of the literary tradition and the crisis of some of its aspects, such as the representation of knights as flawless and infallible. In *Captain America 3, Civil War* (2016), over an argument Captain America tells Iron Man: “you’re a big man in a suit armor, take that off who are you? ... You’re not the guy to make the sacrifice play ... You may not be a threat, but you’d better stop pretending you’re a hero.” To which Iron Man replies “a hero? Like you? You’re a laboratory experiment Rogers, everything special about you came out of a bottle.” These remarks display the cognitive and moral difficulty of identifying what and who (super)heroes are in the twenty-first century: What makes a superhero? His laboratory-enhanced body? His futuristic and hyper-expensive armor? Both? None? Interestingly, in both the *Infinity Saga* and the *Orlando Furioso*, knights are presented at once as superhuman heroes and as human beings with their flaws. At the core of these reflections there lies an ontological and political question regarding the significance of being the guardians of a particular world order and the heirs of a literary genre in contemporary Western society. What does it take for the Avengers, and for Iron Man specifically, to be “defensori de la sua fede” (“guardians of the faith”) and in what ways are they rewarded “deli affanni che habian per nostra sorte” (“for the troubles they face as this is in their destiny”) (Ariosto 1934, V, I 26)?

In particular, the ways in which Iron Man positions himself and his super-heroic identity within the construction of US contemporary ideology and the peculiarities of his superpowers make him the most human but also the most (contemporary) American of the Avengers, the neoliberal superhero. Indeed, Iron Man reconfigures magic—a key element of the chivalric code—in explicitly economic terms, as he does with his super-heroic capabilities and his quests. Although he does not have superhuman qualities, he is a superhero because he has the expertise and enough money to build himself hyper-sophisticated armors and weapons. Therefore, Iron Man applies an economic logic to the chivalric code, in line with what neoliberalism prescribes. According to Wendy Brown, neoliberalism is “a normative order of reason ... transmogrify[ing] every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic” (2015, 9-10). With Iron Man, not only every human but also the super-human domain pertains to the economy and the super-heroic breadth becomes intertwined with it; in *Iron Man 2*, he states his neoliberal rationale very clearly: “I’ve successfully privatized world peace. What more do you want?” In this sense, with Michel Foucault one may define Iron Man as the super-*homo oeconomicus*, understood as “an intensely constructed and governed bit of [super] human capital” (10). In his study of the interconnectedness between

the Marvel Cinematic Universe and US post-9/11 militarization, Brett Pardy suggests that the rising success of the former over the 2000s and 2010s parallels a growing interest in neoliberal security, which he defines as a “new American hegemony,” re-centering “the military as central to the identity of American exceptionalism,” one supported by “the neoliberal turn and intensified by the War on Terror” (2019, 104). Pardy always sees Iron Man as the symbol of this phenomenon, a “previously less popular comic book hero” turned into “pop culture film icon” (103), representing the hegemony of the economic capital.

It is worth noticing that economic capital is essential in the *Orlando Furioso* as well: several times, both Christian and Saracen knights introduce themselves and try to conquer a woman by stressing their value, understood as social and economic prestige. Mandricardo, for instance, so addresses Doralice, with whom he has fallen in love: “Se per amar, l’uom debbe essere amato,/ merito il vostro amor; che v’ho amat’io:/ se per stirpe, di me chi meglio è nato?/ Che ‘l possente Agrican fu il padre mio./ Se per ricchezza, chi ha di me più stato?/ Che di dominio io cedo solo a Dio:” (Ariosto 1934, XIV, 58). One may infer that wealth is a fundamental condition for the protagonists of the chivalric romance too (in line with the rapid mercantile development of the Italian *Cinquecento*), yet in its Iron Man’s transcodification it becomes foundational and pervasive, following the neoliberal precepts.

Interestingly, Iron Man’s neoliberal principles are transposed into a neoliberal applicability too. This means that the economic nature of his superheroic identity relies heavily on technology, a case which makes the once exceptional nature reproducible—and, indeed, the neoliberal logic encourages such an outcome. While other Avengers are unique because born in exceptional and hardly replicable circumstance, Iron Man’s cypher negates such uniqueness: his very reproducibility makes him, time and again, Iron Man, the neoliberal superhero that can be always (re)produced and substituted by new, ever more sophisticated ones. This is so because, ultimately, Iron Man is identifiable with his armor and, in this sense, he/it is the “embodiment” of American neoliberal high-tech supremacy.

Iron Man is, hence, exceptional in the possibility of his continuous reproduction; following the “neoliberal circle,” Iron Man “institutes the norms” of the neoliberal superheroism, but, in so doing (that is, by making it possible for everyone to become a superhero, provided that they have access to a super-expensive armor), he also “creates the conditions that render those norms obsolete,” and encourages the multiplication of ever more and newer Iron “Men” (Huehls 2016, 4). This reproducibility is explicit and even magnified: in *Iron Man 3* (2013) and *Avengers, Age of Ultron* (2015) the Iron Legion appears (a group of Iron Man armors supporting the Avengers’ team), while Iron Man suits are worn also by the Hulk, Pepper Potts, and James Rhodes, the last two becoming superheroes for the first time. This implication of the neoliberal super-heroism suggests a

transcodification of the chivalric code into the age of its hyper-technological reproducibility. In his famous analysis, Walter Benjamin stresses the significance of authenticity in the earliest artworks, those originated in the service of magical rituals. But when “technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual,” not only the artworks’ authenticity and “aura” fail, but also, “to an ever-increasing degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility” (2008, 24). Crucially, “as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics” (25). If we substitute the term “artwork” with “chivalric code” the result is a renovated genre based on politics and accommodating the possibility of reproducing itself by producing ever more contemporary knights. One may see the theoretical extent to which Iron Man represents the contemporary knight, the superhero in the age of its neoliberal reproducibility: the movies showcase this trait by featuring other characters wearing the Iron Man armor, while his privatization of world peace denotes a quintessentially exceptionalist framework, one based on the economization of every aspect of American society and on the protection/expansion of this system. In this sense, Iron Man’s *raison d’être* is based on neoliberal sociopolitics.

The crucial element which seems to distinguish the *Orlando Furioso* as classic chivalric romance from the *Iron Man* saga as neoliberal iteration of this code is their respective approach to technology. As discussed above, the artificial nature of Iron Man relies for his superpowers on hyper-sophisticated technology which is, ultimately, what makes Tony Stark (and Pepper Potts and others) Iron Man. In other words, technology creates the exceptional circumstances generating a superhero, substituting nature which used to do so by accident (for example with Spider Man or the Hulk) or by destiny (see Thor). For these reasons, technological advancement is key to the development and understanding of the neoliberal chivalric romance, allowing for the reproducibility of its content and form. Conversely, in the *Orlando Furioso* technology and, especially, its contemporary progress is framed within negative terms, often connected to the semantics of danger and black magic. Think, for instance, of Cimosco, a tyrant who “gains unfair advantage over his enemies by means of a new machine [...] that uses gunpowder to fire metal balls that kills and maim from a distance;” Orlando defeats him using only the weapons of classic chivalry and has the diabolical engine taken out to sea (from which it would be eventually recovered) (Hanning 2010, 196). By taking the “diabolic engine” to the sea Orlando, the icon of the chivalric romance, wants to put an end to its infinitely reproducible destructive power, after defeating it by means of his own chivalric abilities (subject to natural decline, unlike the artificial *arcibuggio*). However, despite Orlando’s attempts to repress the technological advancement represented by this *arcibuggio*, the latter comes back into the plot, thus indicating a complex dynamic of exclusion but

ultimate acceptance of technology on the part of the classic chivalric code—once again, a genre positioned within a rift.

3. REPRODUCING THE *STATUS QUO*

It has been noted that Ariosto terminates both the *Orlando Furioso* and the preceding chivalric romances about Orlando by affirming the reality of death and the fundamental humanity of the heroes he portrays (Quint 1979, 82). Similarly, the end of *Avengers, Endgame* (2019), in which both the *Iron Man* and the *Infinity* sagas culminate, inscribes the super heroic sacrifice of Iron Man within his death as a human being. The renegotiation of the traditional hero figure in chivalric terms is explicit as early as the end of the first *Iron Man* (2008) movie, when after stating: “I’m just not the hero type, clearly” Tony Stark outs himself saying: “I am Iron Man.” So, should we assume that Iron Man is just not a hero? Is it so because he has always been fundamentally human? However, this earlier scene can be linked to the decisive moment of *Avengers, Endgame*, when Iron Man successfully defeats Thanos sacrificing his own life and proving himself as the definitive superhero of the whole saga. On this occasion, to Thanos’ words: “I’m inevitable,” he replies: “And I am Iron Man”—a realization that makes the disputed and tense relation between the heroic code and Marvel’s superheroes come full circle—and through a snap of his own hand, Iron Man restores the lives previously wiped out by Thanos. The crisis of the heroic figure is thus rectified, but only after problematizing its conventions as well as the spectators’ expectations about it. By sacrificing himself as a human being, Tony Stark/Iron Man proves to be, maybe for the first time, indisputably super-human. However, the inevitability at the core of Thanos and Iron Man’s exchange is worth reflecting upon. Thanos’ genocidal solution to the problem of overpopulation and consequent starvation of some peoples is reversed but, with human lives also the previous detrimental conditions are restored. The neoliberal status quo which Iron Man and the Avengers defend while Thanos undermined is reestablished, but Tony Stark’s death ends his life as a human being, not Iron Man’s enterprise because his very technological reproducibility makes that end impossible. In the end, what proves to be inevitable is the neoliberalism which Iron Man protects at the cost of his own life; a sacrifice which potentially spurs the production of yet other Iron “People.” Benjamin’s “authenticity” is lost as Iron Man is praised for his gesture which claims simultaneously on his exceptionality and his reproducibility; accordingly, “neoliberalism champions [his] status as homogenized object (usually as part of a team [e.g., the Avengers]) just as readily as it flatters [his] unique individuality” (Huehls 2016, 10).

The topos of the quest is another cornerstone of the narrative economy of the *Orlando Furioso* and of the *Iron Man* saga, and it establishes another element of neoliberal reproducibility within the stories. The quest becomes evident in the Avengers chapters, when the superheroes leave aside their individual adventures and join forces to defeat

Thanos: they try to stop him from gathering all the six Infinity Stones by recuperating the stones themselves. The theme of the quest is thus a powerful unifying principle that functions like a centripetal force: the superheroes deviate from their personal quests and story lines to converge on one mission ideologically and morally charged. Similarly, in the *Furioso* the *aventure* typical of the knight errands of previous chivalric romances begins to fit into the framework of the unitary and ideologically oriented quest driving the plot towards a narrative closure (Zatti 2006, 16). A similar tension towards closure is sought by the Avengers too who, despite their parallel adventures, eventually adhere to the structural dynamic of the quest, thus subscribing to a teleological and exceptionalist understanding of history. In *Avengers, Endgame* Iron Man and Captain America argue over the ultimate purpose of the Avengers, and Iron Man says: “that would end the team. Isn’t that the mission? Isn’t that why we fight so that we can end the fight and go home?” Once again, reproducibility is presented as intrinsic yet problematic in the chivalric code: the centripetal tension towards the unity (and uniqueness) of the quest is always challenged by the centrifugal forces of the self-generating, ever-reproducible stories and by the individualities of the knights/avengers. This is another instance of the ideological and formal ways in which the neoliberal chivalric genre reproduces itself and the status quo it mirrors: it constantly creates the premises for and the necessity of a yet another adventure.

This logic typifies another aspect of the *Iron Man* saga, that is the movies’ attitude towards the military complex, a theme which is dealt with in a similarly conservative fashion. Indeed, Iron Man seems to reject the military-industrial complex he has been part of by birth (the “Stark Industries”) when he decides to give up weapons after returning from his traumatic kidnapping in Afghanistan, yet the outcome of that same experience, Iron Man, is presented “as a cyborg figure who has incorporated this military technology into his outfit and made it into an essential, even natural part of his physique” (Hassler-Forest 2011, 358). Eventually, the status quo depicted at the beginning is somehow restored, even though in different shape: the armor which Tony Stark engineers is the epitome of both the repudiation and consolidation of military technology as ideological and narrative foundation of the neoliberal chivalric code.

As discussed above, threats and, consequently, the Avengers’ missions seem to keep coming one after the other. A battle produces a solution that produces more battles and more collateral damages to be mended and so on, in a potentially infinite logic or, rather, in a neoliberal circle. This auto-generative narrative strategy seems to reflect the intellectual and media necessities of a code on the threshold, with its constant tension towards renewal and self-legitimation. Against this multifaceted background, the quest functions as an ordering principle of the diverse storylines in the *Furioso* as of the ever-growing Marvel universe, so broad that has come to be defined as a “multiverse,” meaning a set of different alternate universes that meet and intersect on specific occasions. The stylistic mode through which the multiverse expands and the story lines spill over

one into the other is the *entrelacement*, a foundational technique of chivalric romance that involves the multiplication of narrative threads through the interweaving of encounters and conflicts among various characters (Zatti 2006, 19). Besides the poetics of interlacing, classic chivalric code relies also on other literary techniques such as parallelism and chiasmus, through which “the poet constructs a system of compensatory symmetries through which he controls the expansion of his material, bringing his principles of stylistic and narrative organization to the foreground” (14). These stylistic modes control and organize Marvel’s multiverse too, where every movie, even those centered on one individual superhero, features other superheroes and hints to the next narrative thread and the next adventures. Consider also the signature post-credits scenes after every Marvel movie: they both close and open up the story to other narrative chapters, effectively connecting one adventure to the next, a universe to another, in a kind of meta-interlacing fashion. Marvel’s inter-textual *entrelacement* guarantees the economic profits of the company because it assures ever more new movies and, in this sense, it can be seen as a neoliberal meta-ramification of their cinematic universe.

In conclusion, interpreting Iron Man as a neoliberal superhero is a bijective hermeneutic move that investigates the persistent significance of the chivalric code in the twenty-first century as a stylistic mode to address current socio-political anxieties through solutions which preserve the political and economic *status quo*. On the other hand, the transcodification of the chivalric code in the *Iron Man* saga provides an interpretive angle for the analysis of these movies in light of their exceptionalist logic and their comprehension within a multilayered generic tradition (not only the comic tradition but also the chivalric romance) and a complex socio-political context (the neoliberal society). The centrality of the notion of reproducibility, moreover, seems to explain the success and the mass consumption of Marvel movies while, on the level of the content, it plays into the construction of Iron Man as a quintessentially American and neoliberal phenomenon.

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