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Authentic Representation and Author Identity: Exploring Mental Illness in *The Hobbit* Fanfiction

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Abstract: This paper addresses concerns with authenticity claims that surround mental illness and author identity in fanfiction. I will apply the critiques surrounding representation in media (see Mitchell and Snyder, 2001; Couser 2003, 2009) found in disability studies and fandom studies (see Jenkins 2012) to fanfiction. In this paper, I analyze two pieces of fanfiction which focus on Thorin II also known as Thorin Oakenshield, a character from J.R.R Tolkien's *The Hobbit* novel and Peter Jackson's film adaptations. I explore how in these texts the authors portray mental illness through their characterization of Thorin II. How the author's actual or perceived personal mental health status may impact their writing, and readers' responses to their writing, is explored through the lenses of identity politics (see Calhoun, 1994) and authenticity (Couser, 2009; van Dijk, 1989). In the context of disability and fandom studies, these fanfictions act as examples of a) combination fictional/ autobiographical writings which work to provide what the authors' perceive as accurate portrayals of mental illness, and b) how the author's mental health status impacts the perceived credibility of their work.

Keywords: fanfiction, mental illness, identity, authenticity, fandom studies, disability studies

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Introduction

Questions of identity and authenticity concerning texts have long been topics of discussion and debate in both disability studies and fandom studies. Early in fandom studies, especially when it was found that many heterosexual women were writing slash fanfiction¹, academics and fanfiction readers began to question if these women were writing accurate portrayals of homosexuality or if it was even possible for them to do so (Jenkins, 2013; Jung, 2004). Susanne Jung (2004) explained that fans of slash fanfiction demanded "...that there should be more of an effort to portray "real" men in slash, to include gay culture, write "realistic" gay relationships..., "realistic" gay sex" (p. 6). In Jenkins' (2013) discussion of slash fanfiction, he stated that "Both fan and academic writers characterize slash as a projection of female sexual fantasies, desires, and experiences on to the male bodies of the series characters" (p.191). This explanation offered by Jenkins has given critics evidence to claim that if women are projecting their own heterosexual fantasies onto to male bodies, then realism in their writing would be impossible. There are many parallels between this argument which, to some degree, is still ongoing within the community and the one which surrounds writing characters with disabilities and/or mental illness in fanfiction. Readers of fanfiction often question the author's status as a mentally ill individual. If the author is not mentally ill, readers might question if the

¹ Slash fanfiction, as defined by Jenkins, "refers to the conventions of employing a stroke or "slash" to signify a same-sex relationship between two characters (Kirk/Spock or K/S) and specifies a genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between series protagonists". (Jenkins 2013)

author has done any research before writing these stories. The accuracy and authenticity of how mental illness is portrayed in these stories then comes into question, and people judge whether or not the descriptions are realistic or romanticized. Romanticized portrayals of mental illness are found in the brooding, tortured artist, like Amy Winehouse or Vincent Van Gogh. These figures gain an air of romance and tragedy because they are portrayed as suffering for their art. These idealized depictions can also be found in so-called inspiration porn, "where images of people with disability are constructed as inspirational in order to make the non-disabled feel better about themselves" (Ellis, 2015, p.150). The relationship between romanticized images of mental illness, how readers react to the portrayals perceived as inaccurate, and the possibility that these have a direct connection to the author's mental health status will be expanded on in the background discussion and analysis of the texts.

Besides having both parallel and intersecting arguments within fandom studies, an identity based discourse also exists in disabilities studies. The conversation centers on how able-bodied people are writing about disability (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p. 201); often using it as a plot device or negative character defect in fictional literature (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p. 199). Mitchell and Snyder discuss the three major academic approaches to critically analyzing representation of disability in texts: negative imagery, social realist disability, and new historicism (2001). Negative imagery "sought to diagnose literature as another social repository of stereotypical depictions" (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p. 197). Social realists "searched for more accurate images that could effectively counterbalance this detrimental history" (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p. 200). New historicists "focused most of their attention on the function of disability in "high art"" (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001, p.203). The texts which will be analyzed

fall into the social realist category, as these fanfiction authors attempt to create what they see as more accurate representations of mental illness.

It has been discussed at length that in direct response to these problematic texts, there has been a surge in disabled people writing autobiographies or autoethnographies about their experiences with their disability or disabilities (Couser, 2003; Finger, 1990; Linton, 2007; Tammet, 2007). Couser (2009) says that these texts written by disabled people should not be seen as “...spontaneous self-expression but as a response –indeed a retort- to the traditional misrepresentation of disability in Western culture...” (p. 7). Couser (2009) also discussed how the internet and ease of online publishing through blogs and online diaries helps to advance the public availability of these kinds of life writings (p. 12). This article will expand on Couser’s observation, as the texts being analyzed also exist online and benefit from avoiding the gatekeeping that occurs through traditional print publishing.

The texts selected for analysis are an interesting phenomenon within the context of the troublesome relationship between literature and disability and the pushback against autobiographical writing. These stories are about a fictional character’s mental illness and are based on the author’s own lived experiences or second hand knowledge of someone else’s experiences. They are a combination of autobiography and fictional literature which, whether it is the author’s intent or not, seem to aim towards providing what readers may perceive as a more realistic or accurate look at mental illness. The two texts focused on in this paper are Avelera’s “Burning Low” (2015a) and yubiwamonogatari’s² “Azhâr” (2015); both of which have been posted on the fanfiction hosting website, Archive of Our Own (Avelera, 2015a;

² The “y” in yubiwamonogatari’s username is not capitalized.

yubiwamonogatari, 2015). These texts will be used to illustrate the assertion that the perceived accuracy of how mental illness is portrayed within the story is hinged on the author's mental health status, and that fanfiction can act as fictional/autobiographical hybrid in order to provide readers with authentic representation of mental illness.

Jenkins has published numerous works on fanfiction vis-à-vis gender and sexuality (2013), alongside scholars like Jung who have explored the tensions that exist between heterosexual slash fanfiction authors and their audience concerning realism in their writings (2004). Mitchell and Snyder (2001), along with Couser (2003, 2009), have explored how mental health and disability are treated in other forms of media. This work is unique as it sits at the intersection of fan studies and disability studies by exploring mental health representations in fanfiction and how authors' mental health status can affect audience's perception of accuracy pertaining to representation. Work like this is important because it taps into the increasing concern about accurate representation in culture at large. Social media movements like #OscarsSoWhite challenge the lack of diversity in film, and the very public backlash in response to the film "Me Before You" from the disabled community are popular examples of this concern about representation. This concern for accurate representation, in this case, mental health, is based on the belief that better representation means a better understanding of mental health. The ultimate hope is that a better understanding of mental health will then decrease stigma in society. It is also pertinent because of the burgeoning movement of academics and non-academics seeking to present fanfiction as a genre of writing which should be taken more seriously by academia (Rajagopalan, 2015; Brough & Shresthova, 2012; Coker, 2012). These fanfiction supporters cite, among other reasons, that fanfiction is a venue that allows authors to tackle

issues of representation without the pressures of profit and succumbing to the apparent desires of popular culture.

Background

As mentioned above, slash fanfiction as defined by Jenkins (2013) is a "genre of fan stories positing homoerotic affairs between series protagonists" (p. 186). While slash fanfiction is oft cited in discussions of fanworks and fandom for its more shocking subject matter, fanfiction is an umbrella term which covers any narrative writing by fans about a particular piece of media. Within the writings of fanfiction there are varying degrees of canon compliance; canon being the characters, plot, setting etc. from the original work. This means that some fanfiction authors decide to write stories which adhere to the canon of the media that they are writing within, while other authors choose to only select and highlight certain aspects of the canon in their stories. The purposes for which fanfiction is written are vast and varied; some to fill gaps in the narrative, others to further explore characters and their development, or to explore the relationships between characters.

The pieces of fanfiction which have been selected for analysis predominately feature the character, Thorin II or Thorin Oakenshield³. Thorin is character featured in *The Hobbit*, a novel by J.R.R Tolkien and in Peter Jackson's film adaptations. When Thorin is introduced, he is an exiled dwarf king whose kingdom was attacked and taken over by a dragon. The plot of the novel and the films centers around Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit, who begrudgingly agrees to follow

³ Thorin II will be referenced to as Thorin or Thorin Oakenshield. In this paper he is the only Thorin referenced to, so it is not necessary to repeat the suffix each time he is named.

Thorin and his company of dwarves on a quest to reclaim the kingdom of Erebor. Thorin's past is not delved into in detail, but it is known that since Erebor fell, Thorin has lead the remnants of his people to find new places to settle, lost his brother and grandfather in battle, and his father was captured and killed by enemies. One of the defining features of Thorin's familial history, and eventually his own, is the presence of a mysterious, disposition-altering malady known as gold sickness (Tolkien, 1995). This malady is also known as, more in film canon than novel canon, dragon sickness. The malady is named after the beast because dragons are known for collecting and hoarding treasures, and when a person is afflicted with dragon sickness they do the same. Thorin's grandfather, Thrór, was king of Erebor when he fell ill with the sickness and it was said that he only cared for accumulating wealth. The overflowing treasuries are what ultimately drew the dragon to Erebor and sealed the kingdom's fate. Eventually, Thorin also seems to be affected by dragon sickness: he is quick to anger, spends too much time seeking an important piece of lost treasure, refuses to aid refugees, and almost kills Bilbo (Tolkien, 1995). The way in which Tolkien (1995) described the gold sickness, "...when the heart of a dwarf, even the most respectable, is wakened by gold and by jewels, he grows suddenly bold, and he may become fierce" (p. 218), alludes to the affliction being based in greed. It is not until a final battle, involving multiple parties with various motivations, Thorin seems to break free of the dragon sickness. However, it is in this battle that he receives severe injuries that he eventually succumbs to and dies. In a portion of text not originally published in any of Tolkien's (1980) novels, one of the characters describes Thorin's downfall as being due to his "pride and greed" (p. 340). These interpretations are in direct opposition to those of the fanfiction authors, which will be outlined in the analysis.

Identity politics is a term that has been increasingly deployed in conversations, both academic and non-academic, since the 1970s. When individuals base their political beliefs on one of or the intersections of different cultural identities like race, social class, sexuality, or gender, it is called identity politics (Calhoun, 1994). This practice of identity politics brings people together based their shared identity or identities, to present a powerful front through which they can advocate for laws and cultural changes which will benefit them or improve their situation. This push for political and social change has come to include demands for greater and/or more accurate representation in popular media. Women want to be shown as more than objects of romance, black people demand to be shown as more than just criminals, and people with disabilities want to be shown as more than inspirational or pity stories. As mentioned in the introduction, the logic behind this push for representation is that media acts as one of the major influencing factors in culture, research has shown that the media works to create and perpetuate negative stereotypes (van Dijk, 1989). So, these advocates feel that if there were more characters who they believed accurately represented a minority experience, society may be more accepting and respectful.

An issue which concerns consumers of texts in any genre is the truth or authenticity of the text. This concern is especially prevalent when texts feature narratives or characters that concern groups of people who have been historically discriminated against, be it women, people of color, or disabled people. The concept of authenticity is a complex matter, as definitions have to tackle subjectivity, power dynamics, context, and historicity. The complexity of what is considered authentic representation will be further discussed in the analysis of *yubiwamonogatari*'s text. Couser (2009) placed the push for self-representation by disabled people in this context, "people

with disabilities are also vulnerable to involuntary and prejudicial representation... Western culture has persistently deployed disability in literary and subliterate texts not only as a prompt for narrative but also as a trope..." (p.17). Couser is concerned with autoethnography and life writing, but he has asserted that disabled people writing about "their own experiences with disability are often consciously countering ignorance about or stigmatization of their conditions" (Couser, p. 18, 2009). Couser's assertion can also be expanded to include fanfiction. While the authors of these texts are writing about fictional characters and these character's experiences with disability, the author may inform their writing with their own personal experience or the experiences of someone close to them.

Methods

There are multiple online sources for sharing and reading fanfiction. This investigator evaluated various online archives, including websites exclusively catered to the sharing of fanfiction and more general blogging platforms. Ultimately, Archive of Our Own was selected for sampling, as it is one of the largest fanfiction archives available online. Archive of Our Own (AO3) is an extension of the Organization for Transformative Works (OTW). The organization formed in 2007 as an open source space where fanfiction authors could post their work. OTW also actively works on becoming the central location for online fanfiction by importing fanfiction from other fandom specific fanfiction hosting websites onto AO3. On AO3, fanfiction authors are allowed to add tags to their work in order to make it easier for users to find their work. Tags can concern characters, relationships, tropes, trigger warnings, and plot. Sampling began in November of 2015, with an initial general survey of the texts available. Numerous relevant terms

were entered into in AO3's search bar to see how many texts were tagged by authors with those terms; "Thorin Oakenshield" yielded 14, 048 works, "Thorin Oakenshield dragon sickness" yielded 135 works, and "Thorin Oakenshield mental illness" yielded 31 works. The next step was to read the remaining author tags, the author's summary, and to briefly scan the first chapter of each fanfiction that populated under "Thorin Oakenshield dragon sickness" and "Thorin Oakenshield mental illness". The ultimate decision to highlight Avelera's "Burning Low" and yubiwamonogatari's "Azhâr" was made because these two stories met the criteria of having mental health identifiers in the text, and mental health was a major plot point. These two stories are typical exemplars of *The Hobbit* fanfiction which deals with the character of Thorin Oakenshield and his mental health. The centrality of mental health in these stories allows for the best analysis of how it is represented and explored in *The Hobbit* fanfiction.

These texts are influenced by both the recent *Hobbit* films and the novel from which they were adapted from (Tolkien, 1995); appropriate references to these influences will be made in the analysis in order to assist readers who may not be familiar with the canonical texts. Supplemental primary sources, like posts on author's personal Tumblr blogs, were used to gain insight into the author's frame of mind and reference when writing these texts. There is also an awareness of recent cultural trends, such as the call for cultural representation and authenticity, which impacted what was considered significant in the texts. The two major categories of signs which were marked in the texts were references to behaviors and/or feelings which might be coded as mental health signifiers and direct references to mental health.

Analysis

Avelera's "Burning Low"

From the two texts selected for analysis, Avelera's "Burning Low" is the more explicit in regards to its intentional exploration of mental illness. Alongside the tag "Thorin Oakenshield" on AO3, Avelera (2015a) has added the tags "Depression", "Psychology", and "Therapy". This text is categorized in the group of fanfiction which applies the popular trope "Everybody Lives/Nobody Dies", in which authors ignore characters' canonical deaths and write as though they survived or avoided whatever brought about their deaths. In this case, Thorin survives the wounds he received in the battle for Erebor and has been officially crowned the kingdom's ruler. In the notes, a place where authors can add any pertinent information or commentary for readers before the text of the story begins, Avelera (2015a, chapter 1) gives some insight into what the story is about and what readers should expect. They⁴ wrote that the story "...is a fairly unflinching look at the effects of psychological burnout, which in many ways is indistinguishable from clinical depression" (Avelera, 2015a, Notes), and "...a realistic and fairly modern (for a fantasy setting) look at how someone who has suffered as much as Thorin would react to finally achieving all his goals" (Avelera, 2015a, Notes). Towards the end of the notes section Avelera stated that this text would be their "clinical/realistic one" (2015a), in terms of looking at Thorin's mental health.

Avelera's narrative is one that shuns those romanticized visions of mental illness (Ellis, 2015); Thorin is not seen as being romantically tragic, or inspiring for his mental illness. The first chapter of the text opens with this description,

⁴ Fanfiction authors will be referenced to by their usernames or they/them pronouns because their preferred pronouns are unknown.

When the [dragon] sickness took him he dreamed of gold swallowing him down, dragging him away into madness and swirling, whirling confusion and everything was gold, gold, gold... This? This is mud. It sucks at his boots and makes him slow, stupid. Dragging at his steps and when he looks down there is nothing great in it, no honor or courage, nothing even to resist. Yet it swallows him nonetheless and he cannot get free. (Avelera, 2015a)

There is nothing grand or noble about what Thorin is going through; in the first and subsequent chapters Avelera presents the reader with his experiences of lethargy, frustration, and confusion as to what is causing his distress. However, despite Thorin's struggles to articulate how he is feeling to others, and the occasional verbal outburst, these are not seen as major character defects or flaws by those around him. In direct opposition to the type of writing about mental illness that Mitchell and Snyder (2001) discussed, Avelera writes Thorin as being surrounded by understanding and supportive people; his nephew, Fili, offered his support with "Whatever it is...you don't have to explain. Just know that I'm here" (2015a, chapter 3). Bilbo is the person who requests that Gandalf, an old friend, try and help Thorin and Bilbo consistently offers Thorin emotional support. In an effort to produce what Mitchell and Snyder (2001, p. 200) would call a social realist text, Avelera (2015a) does not focus solely on the grimmer aspects of living with a mental illness; they include moments of levity and small success. Those small successes are most apparent in the most current chapter, where Bilbo has convinced Thorin to go on a small getaway; "...his [Thorin's] steps lighter than they had been in ages...he was too lost in thought to notice the odd looks he received from other dwarves in the hall, or how many did a double-take at the sight of their king's first smile in months" (Avelera, 2015, chapter 5).

In the text, Avelera writes about how Thorin has agreed to speak with Gandalf, a wizard who helped Thorin and company reclaim Erebor. Gandalf acts as a pseudo-therapist for Thorin, as they exist in the fantastical, fictional realm of Middle-Earth where psychology does not

canonically exist. Despite his initial reluctance, Thorin seems to be making progress in response to these therapeutic sessions. As stated above, Avelera's definitive mental health status is unknown, but it may be possible to extrapolate that they might have experience with mental illness. In a text post from Avelera's personal Tumblr blog, tagged 'burning low', they spoke about seeing a therapist regularly again, "just to kinda get a grip on some lingering anxiety stuff that's been catching up to me" (Avelera, 2015b). Avelera's seeing a therapist makes the way in which they write Thorin coping with his mental illness meaningful and more authentic. In the same text post they says their therapist asked a question that was eerily similar to one Gandalf asked Thorin in their fanfiction, "I don't know if it was life imitating art imitating life or wtf just happened but that was super creepy" (Avelera, 2015b). In Thorin's therapy sessions with Gandalf, he has moments of clarity where he begins to understand what is causing him to feel this way. At the end of the text post (Avelera, 2015b), Avelera explains how this question that was similar to Gandalf's also prompted them to also have a Thorin-like moment of clarity. Avelera's experience is a testament to how powerful a text written with the intentions of realistically or accurately representing mental illness can be; this experience is a real world example of Couser's (2003;2009) scholarship on disabled people's life writing and its ability to provide that accuracy and realism.

yubiwamonogatari's "Azhâr"

yubiwamonogatari's "Azhâr", is both an example of a story striving for authenticity in terms of representation and one in which the author's identity has come into question. yubiwamonogatari has tagged the story on Ao3 with "mental health" and "diverse

gender/sexualities/neurotypes" ("Azhâr", 2016). Similar to Avelera's "Burning Low" (2015a), this text is also an "Everybody Lives/Nobody Dies Alternate Universe" fanfiction. In this story, Thorin has been brought back to life under mysterious circumstances but he is not the same. His affected state of mind and physical being post-resurrection could be attributed to supernatural influences, and that is explored in the text. However, some of his feelings and experiences can be attributed to either present or past mental health issues. He experiences anxieties about ruling his newly won kingdom and believes he might still be suffering from either some form of dragon sickness or another mystery malady.

Of course he was still suffering from sickness. From madness. It was obvious even to himself there was something wrong. When he could sleep he was plagued by nightmares, by sweats and shakes, by dread gnawing constantly in the pit of his stomach. He had no appetite, his body still felt heavy and listless though it had been several days now since he'd woken, and he felt as if he was constantly on the edge of some terrible battle. (yubiwamonogatari, 2015, chapter 4)

yubiwamonogatari, like some other fans, interprets Thorin's behaviors while suffering from dragon sickness as being equitable to a mental health issue, instead of the novel's interpretation of it as a manifestation of intense greed (Tolkien, 1980;1995). Much of the earlier chapters are dedicated to Thorin's attempts at reconciliation with Bilbo and other members of the company for what he had done while he experienced dragon sickness. The complexities in rebuilding relationships when someone may physically or emotionally harm someone close to them as a result of their mental illness displays a social realist (Mitchell and Snyder, 2001) approach in writing mental illness; Thorin is not entirely damned as an evil person for his actions, but there is no automatic forgiveness and return to normalcy. When he apologizes to Bilbo, we see that Bilbo struggles with complete forgiveness, "yes, you were sick. You were sicker than I've ever seen

anyone else before in my life, but you did cruel things. I know it wasn't you, I *know* it was the sickness, I know that, I really do..." (yubiwamonogatari, 2015, chapter 4), but as the story progresses the two work towards rebuilding their relationship.

While yubiwamonogatari's fanfiction is not as explicitly an exploration of mental illness as Avelera's, the author has received some criticism and backlash for their depiction of mental illness. A text post on yubiwamonogatari's (2016) personal Tumblr blog addresses some of the points made in the comment, as yubiwamonogatari deleted the original comment when it appeared in the comments section for "Azhâr" on AO3. However, within their response they quoted directly from the original comment,

i know the reality of being mentally ill and trans better than any big name writer just using our pain to get accolades from readers...you don't get to never acknowledge the issues in choosing certain characters as mental illness stories. but suddenly add it on to your fic because it sounds deep and 'makes angst deeper'" (qtd. in yubiwamonogatari, 2016).

As discussed previously, Mitchell and Snyder (2001) cite how disability has been used as a negative plot device or as a negative character trait in texts and this commenter is speaking from an understanding of this problematic history and Couser (2003, 2009) has asserted that disabled people began writing and publishing accounts of their lives in order to counteract what they saw as inaccurate representations of disability in media. In this same text post, yubiwamonogatari (2016) explained that, "90% of what I write vis-a-vis MI [mental illness] and emotional/mental states comes from my own damn experiences, and the other 10% is talked about at length with people comfortable talking to me about their experiences". This comment directly addresses the phenomena of relating personal experience with the most effective or accurate portrayals of disability because of the problematic history of texts which depict disability (Mitchell and

Snyder, 2001). This exchange between yubiwamonogatari and the commenter also provides insight into the challenges of authenticity (Couser, 2003, 2009; Mitchell and Snyder, 2001) and identity politics (Calhoun, 1994; van Dijk, 1989) surrounding a text which concerns disability and/or mental illness. yubiwamonogatari (2016) believes they should not have to share personal information in order to be able to write texts which address these issues, "I certainly don't need to fucking write out my life story to prove myself worthy of writing anything but cishet white girls". While yubiwamonogatari acknowledges that personal experience or careful research informs accurate portrayals of mental illness by sharing that their writing is based on their own experiences, they are reluctant to have to justify their writing choices to some readers. This exchange highlights the tensions between consumers and creators of texts, especially when confronted with an increasing concern for what consumers feel are accurate representations of disability and/or mental illness.

Conclusions

In their current forms, these texts stand as representatives of the latest iterations of multiple intersecting discussions in disability and fandom studies. Fandom studies scholars like Jenkins (2013) and Jung (2004) describe the discourse surrounding perceived accuracy of representations of sexual and romantic relationships between two men when written by women. That discourse of perceived accuracy in representation also occurs in disability studies, when scholars like Mitchell and Snyder (2001) discuss how disability has been represented in texts and how that representation is related to the producers of those texts. These two disciplines intersect in this conversation of perceived accuracy of representations of mental illness in the two texts

analyzed. Mitchell and Snyder (2001) provided three schools of thought in disability studies for criticism of texts; texts like “Burning Low” (Avelera, 2015) and “Azhâr” (yubiwamonogatari, 2015) fall into the social realist category, as the texts authors present what they see as more accurate representation of mental illness. Couser’s (2003;2009) work focused on disabled people’s life writing as response to negative stereotypes in other texts, this concept can be expanded to include Avelera (2015a) and yubiwamonogatari’s (2015) texts; while they are not autobiographies, they rely heavily on their own personal experiences with mental illness. The exchange between yubiwamonogatari (2016) and a fanfiction reader highlights how identity politics and the concept of authenticity affects the negative or positive reception of texts that depict people with disabilities. These conclusions are drawn from only two fanfictions out of the hundreds posted under “The Hobbit” or “Thorin Oakenshield” tags on Archive of Our Own. Future research could examine if the aspirations towards realism and focus on identity hold true for authors and readers in other fandoms and with different characters.

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