

“The Sweetness of the Persian Tongue”: the Limits of Poetry in Medieval and Early Modern Georgia

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Abstract

The history of medieval Georgian poetry is long and complicated. Placed between Persian and Byzantine commonwealths, the unification of the Georgian kingdom under the Bagratids in the eleventh century brought about a dramatic cultural revival. The formation and development of what is known as secular poetry was a reaction to the simultaneous adoption and adaptation of Persian and Byzantine elements by Georgian culture. As a result, over time, a distinct literary genre was shaped, with its own linguistic, graphic, and poetic registers – emerged, which was often contrasted with ecclesiastic writing alongside a rigid differentiation between secular and religious writing generally and poetry specifically. The present paper identifies the origins and reasons for such a differentiation in early modern and modern political and literary discourses. While it mentions many poems from the twelfth to the seventeenth century, two relatively early theories of poetry are discussed in detail: Ephrem Mc'ire's (twelfth-century) reference to the “form and substance” dichotomy in poetry and Shota Rust'aveli's (twelfth- or thirteenth-century) vision of what does and what does not constitute proper poetry. In subsequent centuries, these discussion about the limits of poetry were integrated into identity discourses, as illustrated by the numerous sequels to and emulations of Rust'aveli, and fed into a certain anxiety over Georgian culture within the context of total Persian dominance

Keywords

secular poetry – Rust‘aveli – Ephrem Mc‘ire – Persia – substance – form – meter

1 Introduction

The academic study of medieval Georgian literature suffers from a certain epistemic dissonance. On the one hand, Georgian literature is mostly examined in the context of Byzantine writing, and the history of medieval literature is often conceptualized as a recurring zeal to synchronize Georgian writing and rhetoric with contemporary Byzantine literary theory and praxis. Indeed, between the ninth and the thirteenth centuries, with the foundation and spread of Georgian monastic and literary centers in and outside Georgia, systematic efforts to adapt literature to contemporary Byzantine rhetoric can be observed. This development culminated in what is known as the Hellenophile period of Georgian literature (late eleventh to early thirteenth centuries).¹

On the other hand, however, while “byzantinization” was achieved in practically all areas of writing, including literature, philosophy, and theology, this process was selective. By displaying minimal to no synchronicity with Byzantine poetry, medieval Georgian theory and practice of versification depart substantially from contemporaneous Byzantine trends. Georgian poetry is perceived as a phenomenon substantially independent of Byzantine literature, instead nurtured by folk, Persian, Turkic and other “oriental” sources. In modern Georgian literary theory, which emerged in the early eighteenth century, this type of poetry is usually identified as “secular” (*saero*). The histories of ecclesiastical and secular literature appear so divergent that the histories of ecclesiastical and secular literature are nowadays studied by scholars with different expertise: it is common for historians of ecclesiastical literature to be byzantinists, with good command of Byzantine Greek, while scholars of medieval “secular” literature are more familiar with Persian, Turkic, and Arabic languages and literature.

Medieval “secular poetry” is predominantly studied with reference to the literary production of the eleventh-thirteenth centuries: Šota Rust‘aveli’s *Man in the Panther’s Skin* (c.1200), and two encomia, Šavt‘eli’s (c.1200) *Abdulmesiani* and Č‘axruxaže’s (c.1200) *T‘amariani*, dedicated to Queen T‘amar (1184–1213)

1 For an overview of the Georgian Hellenophile literary school, see, e.g., Ketevan Bezarashvili, “Hellenophilism in Georgian Literature as Cultural Orientation Towards Byzantine Thought: Ephrem Mtsire’s Cultural Orientation, Part 1,” *Scripta & e-Scripta* 14–15 (2015): 335–364.

and her consort, the Ossete prince David Soslan (d. 1205).² Apart from poetry, prose epics such as *Amirandarejaniani* and *Visrasmiani* were also produced at around the same time. The existence of a few other poems is also referenced in early modern texts but they have either been lost or survived in heavily redacted and rewritten forms.

According to standard literary histories, Georgian secular literature originated in the eleventh century as a response to the dramatic cultural revival in Persia, and it flourished until the Mongol invasion in the second half of the thirteenth century, when it abruptly faded from view, as did many other aspects of culture. After a long hiatus and a general decline in literary production, secular poetry was gradually revived in the sixteenth century, with the rise of the Safavids in Persia and the intensification of Georgian-Persian literary relations in the eastern Georgian kingdoms. Medieval poetry, together with its most emblematic representative, Rust'aveli, was rediscovered, imitated, emulated, challenged, and occasionally condemned.³ It is due to the dramatic revival of secular writing, epic and lyric poetry, that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are identified as the "Renaissance" of Georgian literature.⁴

In the eighteenth century, along with the emergence of literary theories and histories, the secular-religious dichotomy, as well as the periodization of literature, and specifically poetry, has become dictated by a certain anxiety over the belonging of Georgian culture, which seemed entangled between Christian and Persian identities. Georgian kings were Persian and Ottoman vassals, and occasionally accepted Islam, even if only nominally. Some even changed their religious affiliations several times. Many were educated in Iran, were fluent in Persian and well-read in Persian literature, and were driven by certain guilt

2 For the edition and study of both encomia, see Ivane Lolashvili, *žveli k'art'veli mexotbeni 1. k'eba mep'isa t'amarisa* [Old Georgian encomiasts, vol. 1, *Praise of Queen Tamar*] (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba, 1957); *žveli k'art'veli mexotbeni 2. abdulmesiani* [Old Georgian encomiasts 2: *Abdulmesiani*] (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba, 1964).

3 Among many examples, see, e.g., the introductory quatrains to *Ioseb-zilikhaniani*, a sixteenth-century Georgian poetic adaptation of Jami's (fifteenth-century) *Yusuf and Zulaykha*, where the author/translator apologetically addresses Rust'aveli and beg his forgiveness for his attempt to imitate him. Giorgi Jakobia, *ioseb-zilixaniani's k'art'uli versiebi* [Georgian versions of Ioseb-Zilikhaniani] (Tbilisi: Tbilisi University Press, 1927).

4 For the chronology and classification of early modern Georgian poetry, see Donald Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia: A History* (London: Routledge, 2013), 69–130, the section aptly titled "The Golden Age, the Fall and the Resurrection." Korneli Kekelidze's magnum opus, *žveli k'art'uli literaturis istoria* [History of Georgian Literature, 2 vols] (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba 1980, 1981) first published in 1952 and republished numerous times, where most of these theories have been codified, remains the most comprehensive and authoritative overview of medieval Georgian literature, including poetry.

due to their admiration for Persian culture. Entangled between categories such as Christian and non-Christian, Georgian and non-Georgian, Byzantine and Persian, western and eastern, literary histories were written and rewritten depending on current ideological or national projects. Therefore, as it shall be argued below, the secular-religious dichotomy so strongly entrenched in modern Georgian scholarship, as well as the national narrative, is, in a sense, a projection of seventeenth-and-eighteenth-century conceptualizations of the medieval state of affairs and was less rigid earlier. Crucially, practically the entire “secular” medieval corpus (poetry and chronicles) survives in seventeenth and eighteenth-century manuscripts, exactly when such conceptualization was being formed. The only exceptions are two pre-modern discussions on the nature and purpose of poetry, written in the course of the late eleventh and thirteenth centuries: the first was authored by the philosopher and church father, Ephrem Mc’ire (d. c.1101), while the second is expounded in the proem of the twelfth or thirteenth-century poetic masterpiece the *Man in the Panther Skin*, attributed to Šot’a Rust’aveli.⁵

While the religious-secular dichotomy has indeed emerged over time as a historicized and ideological concept, it shall be argued that originally such a distinction was far less tenable. Arguably, the reason such a distinction emerged in the first place was not a conceptual differentiation between secular and religious poetry as such, but the overwhelming popularity that Šot’a Rust’aveli’s epic romance, the *Man in the Panther Skin*, enjoyed in Georgian identity, rhetoric, and literature. Arguably it was Rust’aveli’s poem that generated this conceptual cleavage. This concept was generalized over time and turned into an interpretive schema that encompassed all areas of medieval and early modern Georgian culture.

2 The “Secular” vs. “Religious”

The historical and philological concept “medieval Georgian secular literature,” which predominantly referred to poetry, was always subject to certain ideological dictates. In twentieth-century scholarship, medieval Georgian secular

5 The prologue is usually considered as an addition to the main text of the poem; however, whether or not this happened soon after the poem’s composition, or at a relatively later date, is impossible to establish. For the existing debates over the authenticity of the prologue and epilogue, see, for example, Nicholas Marr, *Vstupitelnye i zaključitelnye strofy Vitiāza v barsovoī kozhe* [Introductory and concluding quatrains of the Man in the Panther’s Skin of Shota of Rust’avi] (St Petersburg: Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1910); Kekelidze, *History of Georgian Literature*, 100–101; Aleksandre Baramidze, *Šot’a rust’aveli: vep’xistqaosnis šedgeniloba* [Šot’a Rust’aveli. The composition of the *Man in the Panther’s Skin*] (Tbilisi: Mec’niereba, 1975).

literature was labeled, to quote Pavle Ingoroqva, one of its most brilliant students, a “strange anomaly,” as no comparable development has been documented in Armenian or other neighboring Christian cultures.⁶

Consequently, scholars eagerly sought its roots and trajectories and tried to explain the emergence and popularity of this genre. The academic study and classification of secular poetry began in the eighteenth century, with the publication of several handbooks and historical surveys of types of poetry.⁷ Nicholas Marr was one of the first modern scholars to explain the emergence of secular poetry in Georgia. According to Marr’s radical conceptualization, in the eleventh century:

Western cycle [i.e. Byzantine] was contrasted with another – Oriental, which connected Georgia with the Muslim world, predominantly with Muslim Persia, who by then had managed to revive its national literature. These two cycles of intellectual interests, one exclusively spiritual-scholastic, and another aesthetic, became the source of the two literary trends in Georgia – western, or Byzantine ... and oriental, i.e. Iranian. One may argue a priori that the oriental trend that came from a Muslim country, could not have been a welcome guest for the representatives of Byzantinism who already had deep roots throughout the country. Secularly-minded “Persophiles” must have been aware of the initial intolerance towards their trend in the dominant literary spirit, and it was perhaps due to this attitude that they had adopted a script separate from ecclesiastic writing. Hopefully, over time, we will discover in Georgian manuscripts some hints, if not of a confrontation between the two trends, then at least of mutual distaste between their representatives.⁸

6 For Ingoroqva’s vast study of the development of Georgian poetry, see Pavle Ingoroqva, Giorgi Merčule. *K’art’veli mcerali meat’e saukunisa* [Giorgi Merč’ule. Georgian author of the tenth century] (Tbilisi: Sabčot’a Mcerali, 1954), 554–888.

7 E.g. Ioane Batonishvili, *kalmasoba* [Art of writing], ed. Tsiala Kakhabrishvili (Tbilisi: Merani, 1990), 600–636. For a study, see Givi Mikadze, *nakrvevebi k’art’uli poetikis istoriidan* [Studies in the history of the Georgian poetics] (Tbilisi: Mec’niereba, 1974), 13–16. Interestingly, one of the first scholars to write a history of poetry was Katholikos-Patriarch Antony I (1720–1788), who was highly critical of what he referred to as “poetry of laymen” and who initiated a program aimed at reviving archaic iambic poetry in opposition to the dominant Rust’avelian meter. Anton Bagrationi, *cqobilsitquaoba* [Art of metered speech], ed. Ivane Lolashvili (Tbilisi: Mec’niereba, 1980).

8 Nicholas Marr, “Vozniknovenie I rastsvet drevnegruzinskoi svetskoi literatury” [Emergence and flourishing of Old Georgian secular literature], *Zhurnal Ministerstva Narodnogo Proshveshenia* 326 (1899): 223–252. (Translation by Nikoloz Aleksidze). Later Marr retracted his theory and introduced a Turkic factor in the formation of secular Georgian poetry.

Marr conceptualized medieval secular literature as a hypothetical rift between religious, that is Byzantine-influenced, and secular, that is Persianising, writing and described an equally hypothetical conflict between the two. Marr became so convinced of his own hypothesis that he argued that the *Man in the Panther's Skin* was also a Persian translation, due to the “this Persian tale ...” line in the poem and the clerical resentment towards it.⁹ Other Georgian scholars found Marr's theory of the “alien” origins of the most brilliant works of Georgian literature unacceptable. Whether in response to Marr or independently, Korneli Kekelidze and Pavle Ingoroqva developed a theory of alternative continuity, whereby the poets of the twelfth century, including Rust'aveli, Č'axruxaže, Savt'eli, and others, are presented as deeply rooted in religious literature from the previous centuries.¹⁰

The phenomenon of “secular poetry” had yet another ideological role to play in Soviet scholarship. In 1937, in the middle of the Great Purge, Rust'aveli's eight hundredth anniversary was celebrated, and its academic edition and translations were commissioned. This was at the same time that Neẓāmi Ganjavi was nationalized as a great Azerbaijani poet, and his anniversary too celebrated with great pomp.¹¹ In Joseph Stalin's project, these medieval poets were supposed to prefigure and celebrate the “anti-idealist” Marxian ideology in somewhat mysterious ways. As such, it was medieval Georgian secular literature, with its flagship *The Man in the Panther Skin*, that became the central component of the emerging idea of the “Oriental Renaissance”, cultivated under Stalin's propaganda, and crudely constructed on Marxist methodology and Soviet nationalist aspirations. This political and scholarly myth argued for the existence of Renaissance ideas in the “Orient”, i.e. within the territory of the Soviet Union, that prefigured the Italian Renaissance.¹² In 1947, Shalva Nutsubidze, one of Stalin's favorite philosophers, published a programmatic study entitled *Rust'aveli and the Oriental Renaissance*. Nutsubidze advanced a grand narrative of a neo-Platonic, anti-ecclesiastical, and even heretical resistance to Constantinopolitan Orthodoxy, cultivated in the twelfth century by

9 Nicholas Marr, “Gruzinskaia poëma “Vitiaz v Barsovoï shkure” Shoty is Rustava i novaiia kul'turnoistoricheskaiia problema 1. Plemennaiia sreda” [Georgian poem “Man in the Panther's Skin” by Shota of Rustavi and a new cultural and historical problem. 1. Ethnic milieu], *Izvestiia akademii nauk* 11, no. 7 (1917): 415–446. For the quote, see below.

10 Korneli Kekelidze, *žveli k'art'uli literaturis istoria* 2 [History of Old Georgian literature, 2 vols] (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba), 2: 27–215.

11 Victor Schnirelmann, *The Value of the Past: Myths, Identity and Politics in Transcaucasia* (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2001), 102–103.

12 See, e.g., Erick Scott, *Familiar Strangers: The Georgian Diaspora and the Evolution of Soviet Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 202.

philosopher Ioane Petrici, his predecessors and successors at the Gelati school, and Rust’aveli, who was alleged to have been his collaborator at the time.¹³ The hypothesis, which rather awkwardly synthesized Marxist methodology and Soviet nationalism, drew a picture of a grandiose and dramatic conflict between the Orthodox ecclesiastical tradition and its heterodox opposition, materialized chiefly in Georgian secular poetry and its “neo-Platonic” spirit.¹⁴ Within this narrative, Rust’aveli was portrayed as a champion of “materialism” and a symbol of secularism, which allegedly explained his repression during the late medieval and early modern eras, as well as the glaring absence of Rust’aveli’s manuscripts before the seventeenth century.

Nutsubidze argues that a parallel “canon” of medieval secular poetry coexisted with the dominant religious tradition and recurrently conflicted with it. Nutsubidze based his theory on a (pseudo)-Rust’avelian concluding quatrain in the epilogue of the *Man in the Panther’s Skin* where the author places the poem in the context of the Georgian epic tradition:¹⁵

ამირან დარეჯანის-ძე მოხეს უქია ხონელსა,
აბდულ-მესია შავთელსა, ლექსი მას უქელს რომელსა,
დიღარგეთ სარგის თმოგველსა, მას ენა-დაუშრომელსა,
ტარიელ მისსა რუსთველსა, მისთვის ცრემლ-შეუშრობელსა.¹⁶

Amiran Darejanisze was praised by Mose Xoneli,
Abdulmesia [was praised] by Šavt’eli, whose poetry was greatly admired,

13 Shalva Nutsubidze, *Rust’aveli i vostochnyi’ Renaissance* [Rust’aveli and Oriental Renaissance] (Tbilisi: Zarya Vostoka, 1947). In the present article, the 1976 Georgian edition of the same work will be referenced: Shalva Nutsibudze, *rust’aveli da agmosavluri renesansi. Šromebi 4* [Rust’aveli and Oriental Renaissance. Works, 4] (Tbilisi: Mec’niereba, 1976). On Stalin, Nutsubidze and the Rust’aveli project, see Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Stalin: The Court of the Red Tsar* (London: Phoenix, 2004), 329.

14 Nutsubidze extensively quotes Friedrich Engels’s thesis that “throughout all of the Middle Ages there was a revolutionary opposition against Feudalism. Depending on the circumstances it reveals itself sometimes as mysticism, sometimes as flagrant heresy, and yet other times as armed rebellion”; Nutsubidze, *Rust’aveli*, 19.

15 In the vast Georgian scholarship on Rust’aveli, there have been many attempts to identify individual quatrains as Rust’avelian, pseudo-Rust’avelian, or as much later additions. Regrettably, much of this discussion is conjectural and, due to the absence of early manuscripts, the quest for “original Rust’aveli” is futile. The debates over these concluding quatrains were part of the larger debates over the introduction and conclusion to the poem. For relevant literature, see n. 3.

16 Shota Rust’aveli, *vep’xistaosani* [The Man in the Panther’s Skin], ed. Akaki Shanidze (Tbilisi: Academy of Sciences, 1975).

Dilarget' [was praised] by Sargis T'mogveli¹⁷ with his inextinguishable tongue,
 Tariel [was praised] by his Rust'aveli, who shed unceasing tears for him.

Nutsubidze believed that this quatrain had been added to the poem with an intention to canonize an alternative continuity of Georgian literary heritage, as concentrated exclusively on matters secular.¹⁸ As a result, since the mid-twentieth century, a certain Manichean view of the history of medieval poetry was shaped, as a millennium of opposition between secular and religious tendencies in the history of Georgian literature. For Marr, the opposition manifested itself in Byzantine versus "Oriental" tendencies within Georgian literature, whereas since Nutsubidze, the same history has been conceived as a struggle between materialist and religious movements. The manuscript history of secular poetry, or rather its notable absence and late character, seemingly supported this hypothesis. Several later reports, dating from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, also claim that an overt war had been waged against secular poetry and its chief representative, Rust'aveli, whose manuscripts were allegedly publicly burned or thrown into the river Mtkvari.¹⁹

With the end of Stalinism, the grandiose project fell into disfavor, and Nutsubidze's theory of "Oriental Renaissance" was criticized, although lauded for its ingenuity by Alexey Losev and others.²⁰ With the rise of religiosity and rehabilitation of medieval Georgian religious writing, which was earlier considered repetitive and rather unimaginative, the radical conceptualization of a drastic emergence and spread of secular poetry, as an opposition to religious writing, has been rejected. In contemporary Georgian national discourse, which credits the Orthodox Church with maintaining the national idea throughout centuries, all claims of candid or overt conflict between secular and religious forms are dismissed. Instead of looking for conflicts, heresies, materialism, and rejection of dogmatic theology, scholars often seek prototypes and models for Rust'aveli and other twelfth-century court poets in earlier

17 The original *Dilariani*, the epic of Dilarget', has not survived.

18 Nutsubidze, *Rust'aveli*, 197–224.

19 This claim first appeared in Platon Ioseliani's edition of Timot'e Gabashvili's *Travels*. See, Timot'e Gabashvili, *Pilgrimage*, ed. and commented, Platon Ioseliani (Tbilisi: Press of the Caucasian Viceroy, 1852).

20 Aleksey Losev, *Ėstetika Vozrozhdeniia* [The aesthetics of the Renaissance] (Moscow: Mysl', 1978).

religious poetry, which originated in the fifth century and found its zenith in the tenth century, prefiguring the rise of Rust'aveli.²¹

3 The Emergence of "Secular" Poetry

Arguably, the eleventh and twelfth centuries were significant turning points in the development of Georgian literature. The turn of the first millennium was indeed an era of a series of comprehensive transformations in south Caucasia. The unification of Georgian principalities under the Bagratid rule brought about cultural upheaval. Earlier, in the ninth century, due to the Arab occupation of Tbilisi, Georgia's political and cultural center of gravity was transferred from the south-central Caucasus deeper into Anatolia and thus closer to Constantinople. The rise of the Bagratids resulted in the formation of a centralized and formal court and literary culture. The Bagratids commissioned the rewriting of their dynastic histories with a zeal to distance themselves from their Iranian background. Meanwhile, they byzantinized their court culture, borrowing Byzantine rhetorical models of legitimization.²² With the territorial and political expansion, new monastic establishments were founded first in Georgia and then outside it, in the heart of Byzantine monasticism. The foundation of the Georgian monastery on Mt. Athos (Iveron Monastery), which was a direct result of tenth-century politics in eastern Anatolia, became the most momentous step towards the byzantinization of Georgian culture. The territorial, political, and ideological proximity of Georgia to Constantinople led its religious and secular elites to adopt the Constantinopolitan models: while Georgia's rulers and then kings bore Byzantine honorific titles, in the Church, the old Jerusalemite liturgy was supplanted with the Constantinopolitan rite, and new translations from Greek saturated the Georgian literary landscape to

21 Such teleological continuity was already apparent in Kekelidze's above-quoted works. Georgian scholarship on Rust'aveli, which has been branded as a separate discipline "Rustvelology", is extremely vast. For example, an overview of the clerical attitude towards Rust'aveli and a defence of the position that Rust'aveli was never condemned or persecuted, along with an extensive bibliography, can be found in the nine volumes of *Rustvelology* published between 2000 and 2009 by the Shota Rust'aveli Institute of Georgian Literature.

22 On Georgia's political and ideological byzantinization, see Stephen H. Rapp Jr., *The Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes: Caucasia and Iranian Commonwealth in Late Antique Georgian Literature* (Farnham: Routledge, 2016), 356 and elsewhere in the study. See also, Sandro Nikolaishvili, "Byzantium and the Georgian World c. 900–1210: Ideology of Kingship and Rhetoric in the Byzantine Periphery" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Central European University, 2019).

accommodate the new liturgical praxis. Over the next two centuries, further literary productions were created with attempts to achieve further synchronicity with the Greek original, which marked the “hellenophile” period of Georgian literature. The writings and translations of the greatest *hellenophiles*, Ephrem Mc’ire (d. 1101), Arseni Iqalt’oeli (d. 1127), and Ioane Petrici (c.1100) appeared and transformed practically all areas of writing.²³

Nevertheless, “byzantinization” was indeed selective. Georgian elites were attracted to Constantinople, but this attraction was closely accompanied by a growing political and religious opposition to Constantinople. Whether in their zeal to shape a culture distinct from the Byzantines’, or indeed independent of this, since the eleventh century, Georgia’s secular elites have become increasingly impressed and drawn to Persian culture. Byzantinization, for example, never affected the onomasticon, and Georgia’s secular elites kept their dynastic names of Iranian, Armenian, or old Georgian origin. Histories too were replete with names borrowed from the Persian *Shahnameh* and other Persian epics.²⁴ Finally, David IV (r. 1089–1125) refused all Byzantine titles, and instead of Greek, the *linguae francae* became Arabic and Persian. Until the rule of Demetre I (r. 1125–1156), David’s son, coins were minted either in Georgian only or in Greek and Georgian. Since Demetre, however, coins were issued in Georgian and Arabic, and later Persian. In contrast to his predecessors, Demetre I also resorted to Islamic models, by merging Christian imagery with Arabic inscriptions.²⁵

Although in practically all medieval cultures, the rise of secular literature was tied to court culture, in Georgia it was also marked by heavy Turkic and Persian influences. By then, “it seems that Georgian readers of the classical period either had Georgian versions of the poems by Ferdowsi (1020), Unsuri (1040), Gorgani (1050), Nezami (1209), and of works like *Kalīla wa-Dimna*, *Dastan-Ḥātim-al-Ṭayy*, and the *Qābūs-Nāme*, or were quite well acquainted with the original texts.”²⁶ Apart from translations, original epic literature was also heavily indebted to its Persian prototypes, the most notable of which is the twelfth-century epic of *Amirandarejaniani* (The Epic of Amiran son of

23 For a detailed overview, see Nikoloz Aleksidze, “Translations: Georgian,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Literature*, ed. Stratis Papaioannou (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 620–621.

24 For examples, see Alexandre Gvakharia, “Georgia iv: Literary Contacts with Persia,” in *Encyclopedia Iranica* 2001, last accessed 28 June, 2024, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/georgia-iv--1#:~:text=With%20the%20rise%20of%20the,Persian%20literary%20classics%20quite%20early.>

25 See the online catalogue of Georgian coins: <http://geonumismatics.tsu.ge/en/catalogue/>.

26 Gvakharia, “Georgia iv. Literary Contacts with Persia,” 481–86.

Darejan)²⁷ In the late twelfth century two lengthy poetic encomia were created: the *Abdulmesiani*, presumably written by Ioane Šavt'eli and the *T'amariani*, whose author is traditionally considered a certain Č'axruxaze. Both were Queen Tamar's court poets and praised the monarch Tamar and her husband, David Soslan. While the encomia are riddled with Hellenic and Byzantine literary and mythological images, literary techniques were also borrowed from Seljuk and Persian encomiastic poetry.²⁸

The rising popularity of Persian in Georgian culture and literature is explained by the changing political landscape of the south Caucasus in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. A momentous date in the formation of what is known as Georgian secular court literature is the year 1122, when David IV retook Tbilisi from the Arabs and transferred his capital from Kutaisi in western Georgia to the east. By then, Tbilisi had already established itself as a true urban center with a diverse ethnic composition, where until the early twentieth century, ethnic Georgians constituted a minority. Due to the relocation of Georgia's political center to the east, from the culturally homogenous Kutaisi to the cosmopolitan Tbilisi, literary Georgian began to develop from the eastern Georgian dialect, giving rise to the modern Georgian language. The kingdom expanded at the expense of neighboring Muslim states and covered practically the entirety of Muslim south Caucasia. Tbilisi's nearest non-Georgian political and cultural entity was Shirvan in what is now Azerbaijan, ruled by the influential *Shirvanshah* dynasty. The Seljuk invasion and control of the area in the eleventh century contributed to the creation of a thriving city, nurtured by both Persian and Turkic cultures. Since David invaded Shirvan two years after capturing Tbilisi, Shirvan has become increasingly associated with Georgia, with the *Shirvanshahs* effectively becoming its vassals. It was perhaps in this period that Persian and Tajik literature was channeled through Shirvan to Georgia: Persian and Turkic minstrels, the Ashughs/Ashiks, crisscrossed Georgia and captivated local poets and writers, which arguably dramatically affected literature until the nineteenth century. As explained by Alexandre Gvakharia:

Frequent receptions and feasts at the royal and feudal courts attracted panegyrists, story-tellers (*qeššak'vān*), and singers not only from all parts of Georgia but also from neighboring countries as well as from distant lands. Č'axruxaze, the historian of Queen Tamar (r. 1184–1212), describes

27 For the English translation and commentary, see Robert H. Stevenson, *"Amiran-Darejaniani": A Cycle of Medieval Georgian Tales Traditionally Ascribed to Mose Khoneli* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

28 For a discussion, see Lolashvili, *žveli k'art'veli 1; žveli k'art'veli 2*.

the arrival of the *Šarvānšāh* at the head of a large retinue, undoubtedly including poets, since Khaqani *Šarvānī* alludes to such an occasion in the description of his journey to Tbilisi in his *Maṭnawī*. He mentions a number of Georgian place-names: Muxrani, Načarmagevi, the summer palaces of the royal Bagrationi family ... He also indicates his knowledge of Georgian (*gorjīgūy*) and uses a Georgian word (*mui*, “come”) in one of his rhymes (Y. Marr). The poet Falakī wrote an elegy (*martīya*) on the death of Demetre I (r. 1125–1156), the king of Georgia. Nizami Ganjavi often mentions and describes Georgia (Apkhaz, which then referred to all of Georgia) in his poems *Khosrow and Shirin* and *Iskandarnameh*.²⁹

While practically all the important pieces of Byzantine and patristic writing were translated in the period between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries, so was the Persian epic. In the early twelfth century, Fakhruddin As'ad Gurgani's poem *Vis and Rāmīn* was translated and adapted.³⁰ The resulting prose *Visramiani* became the most influential piece of Georgian literature and served as a model for subsequent poetry, most notably the *Man in the Panther's Skin*.³¹ In the seventeenth century, King Arč'il II (r. 1661–1698) wrote an incomplete poetic version of *Visramiani*,³² however, the twelfth-century version was emulated throughout the rest of the history of Georgian poetry. Another exceptionally popular epic was Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, however it has not survived in its original translation and its wide dissemination is attested in other sources. Since the fifteenth century, numerous other poetic adaptations of various stories from the *Shahnameh* appeared too.³³ It was this influx of Persian literature and poetry that is, by tradition, considered a dramatic turning point in Georgian culture, which gave birth to an entirely new, alien, and problematic genre of poetry. To quote Donald Rayfield:

29 Gvakharia, “Georgia iv. Literary Contacts with Persia,” 481–86.

30 John O. Wardrop, *Visramiani, The Story of the Loves of Vis and Ramin* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1914).

31 For the academic edition with commentary, see *Visramiani*, ed. Magali Todua and Alexander Gvakharia (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba, 1962); For some secondary literature, see Nicholas Marr, *Voprosy Vepxistkaosani i Visramiani* [Questions of Vepkhistaosani and Visramiani] (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba, 1966); Jemshid Giunashvili, “Visramiani,” in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 2013, last accessed, 28 June, 2024, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/visramiani>.

32 Arč'ili, *t'xzulebat'a sruli krebuli 2 tomad* [Complete works, 2 vols.], ed. Aleksandre Baramidze and Nikoloz Berdzenishvili (Tbilisi: Sak'art'velos Muzeumi, 1936), 1: 136–225.

33 For the complete edition of the Georgian version of the *Shahnameh*, see Iustine Abuladze, *šah name. k'art'uli versiebi* [*Shahnameh. The Georgian versions*] (Tbilisi: State University Press, 1934).

The shock of the *Visramiani*'s entry into a hitherto clerical culture must have been enormous: the nominal Islam of the original has been replaced by amorphous monotheism and a belief in arbitrary fate. Nothing shocks the narrator, not incest, adultery, bigamy, treachery, domestic violence, or erotomania. The shock lasted so long that in the eighteenth-century Georgian luminaries still felt the need to destroy surviving manuscripts: an anonymous verse of 1769 warns, "Any man who believes in God, let him not look at the *Visramiani*. It will darken his daylight, he will see its faults in hell." We are lucky that at least a seventeenth-century manuscript survived, to be published for the first time in 1884.³⁴

Whether or not *Visramiani*'s entry was indeed a shock is perhaps a matter of perspective, yet what is now identified as secular literature indeed flourished in such ambivalent circumstances. Resulting from the consolidation of the royal court and its growing ties with neighboring principalities, this literature was nurtured by Greek, Persian, and Turkic imagery, tropes, and vocabulary, as well as vernacular Georgian poetic tradition. Although it is tempting, along with Marr or Nutsubidze, to see a "clash of civilizations" in this hybridity, medieval writing does not betray any particular anxiety over this. The situation changed in the sixteenth century, when the anxieties over belonging gradually emerged with the general political and cultural decline. This happened first as interpolations and additions to Rust'aveli's text, closely followed by historical rewritings and, by the eighteenth century, as radical visions of what proper poetry must be like.

4 Secular Language and Script

Let us have a look at some of the features of medieval Georgian writing that by tradition serve as evidence for a fundamental dichotomy between "secular" and "religious." In Georgian scholarship, apart from referring to the substance of literary production, *saero* (secular), as a term, describes also, and indeed crucially, the form or register in which a particular discourse was composed. In other words, arguably, in medieval Georgian writing, the religious-secular dichotomy is evident most clearly in the substance-form dichotomy, in which the form is linguistic register, poetic meter, and script.

34 Rayfield, *The Literature of Georgia*, 72.

Along with the emergence of secular literature, the eleventh century is traditionally marked as the beginning of the Middle Georgian (or, according to some scholars, Modern Georgian) language.³⁵ “Middle Georgian” refers to a newly-emerging literary register initially used exclusively for poetry. Rust’aveli is credited with creating this register, which remained popular until the eighteenth century. These linguistic transformations were among other reasons, such as the adoption of the eastern Georgian dialect, caused by the heavy influence of Turkic and New Persian grammar and vocabulary. Earlier, Middle Persian vocabulary penetrated Georgian primarily through the Armenian medium, however, since the twelfth century, the language has been further enriched through direct contact with neighboring Persian principalities. Consequently, in modern corpora, all poetic and prose secular texts composed since the twelfth century until the late eighteenth century, are classified as Middle Georgian, whereas most religious texts, irrespective of the date of their creation, are usually labeled as Old Georgian. While “Old Georgian” describes both the period of the Georgian language as well as the genre, “Middle Georgian” refers almost exclusively to the register of secular literature.

Marr famously claimed that the “Persophiles” had adopted their own linguistic register and script to oppose the dominant clerics. Though this hypothesis has been disproven for some time, the association of a particular period of Georgian language with secular poetry persists. Nevertheless, the very existence of Middle Georgian, whether it was an actual stage in the development of the literary language, or just a stylistic trend, is debatable and there is no scholarly consensus on this issue. I believe that it has been relatively convincingly argued that instead of a rigid differentiation, more nuances can be identified in literary style.³⁶ In case of poetry, one can argue that the overwhelming influence of Rust’aveli’s idiosyncratic style became dominant in epic and lyric poetry of subsequent centuries, when poets sought to imitate Rust’aveli in his inventiveness and artificial linguistic constructions.

This rigid distinction between linguistic registers is also an eighteenth-century invention and was codified by Patriarch Antony I (r. 1722–1788), who had a very conservative understanding of what constitutes proper Georgian. Antony claimed that there existed three registers of language: the first was for

35 *The Man in the Panther's Skin* is considered as the starting point of this new Georgian, irrespective of whether one calls it “Middle” or “Modern.” For periodization, see Yakov G. Testeletis, “Kartvelian (South Caucasian) Languages,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Languages in the Caucasus* ed. Maria Polinsky (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 1–52.

36 Taniel Putkaradze, *k'art'velologiis šesavali* [Introduction to Kartvelology] (Tbilisi: Andrew the First-Called University, 2014).

plain people to understand, the second register was used in scholarly and exegetical texts, whereas the third register was designed for the most complicated philosophical and theological matters.³⁷ Antony, however, does not differentiate between secular and religious registers, since *saero* for him was not even worth putting in writing.

Apart from language, "secular" also describes one of the three historic Georgian scripts, which seemingly also emerged at around the same time, as secular literature, and roughly reflects the development of the Georgian language. Since the eleventh century, a distinctly new script has started to shape, which in the fourteenth century was identified as *Mxedruli* (i.e. military) as opposed to *Xuc'uri* (i.e. clerical). In histories of Georgian writing, *Mxedruli* is claimed to have been created for secular purposes as opposed to conservative and clerical *Xuc'uri*. Here is how Akaki Shanidze, the author of standard Georgian grammar, conceptualizes this history:

New kinds of letters were developed in the eleventh century based on a four-tiered system. In addition, the edged letters became rounded and most of them became straight. The old script (rounded or edged) persisted among the clerics for their use, whereas for secular purposes a new script was utilized, which was called *Mxedruli*. ... With the establishment of *Mxedruli*, the old script was identified as *Xuc'uri*, i.e. used by clerics for ecclesiastic purposes.³⁸

This script that became the foundation of the modern Georgian alphabet was initially used in royal charters and later in all formal proceedings.³⁹ Although graphically based in *Xuc'uri*, over a short period, *Mxedruli* came to bear no resemblance to religious script or to its monumental prototypes, instead imitating Persian in its decorativeness. The writing that was initially created out of convenience, soon transformed into the elaborate and highly sophisticated, if not unapproachable hand of court scholars and chancellors. *Mxedruli* has become synonymous with secular and has been widely used since the eleventh century in administrative documents and royal signatures. By the time the earliest manuscripts of Rust'aveli and other poets started to appear in the early

37 Elene Babunashvili, *anton 1 da k'art'uli gramatikis sakit'xebi* [Antony 1 and questions of Georgian grammar] (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba, 1970), 235–237.

38 Akaki Shanidze, *žveli k'art'uli enis gramatika* [Grammar of Old Georgian Language] (Tbilisi: Tbilisi State University, 1976), 9–11.

39 For samples with descriptions, see Zaza Aleksidze, Buba Kudava, Dali Chitunashvili et al., *Dated Georgian Manuscripts: An Album* (Tbilisi: National Centre of Manuscripts, 2015).

seventeenth century, the differentiation was already clear – they were always and exclusively copied in *Mxedruli*, whereas all religious texts were retained in archaic *Xuc'uri*.⁴⁰

Yet, this rigid differentiation, which has been zealously maintained since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, does not seem to be equally strict in the Middle Ages. The majority of documents and charters were indeed written in *Mxedruli*, yet, this is explained by the necessity to document their authenticity, which was more achievable through authorial and unique handwriting. Besides, in rare instances, royal charters were still written in *Xuc'uri*,⁴¹ whereas some liturgical and biblical texts were executed in *Mxedruli*.⁴² In one curious case, the copyist of the tenth-century Gospel from St Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai (St Catherine's Monastery, MS O/Sin.Geo 38) utilized all three scripts – *Xuc'uri* uppercase for the text of the Gospel, *Xuc'uri* lowercase for the first part of his colophon, and *Mxedruli* for the end of the colophon. The only reason the copyist switched to *Mxedruli* was the page layout – he needed to squeeze the remaining letters into the margins, which was much easier with *Mxedruli* and would not violate the structure of the page.⁴³ The manuscripts of other “secular” texts, such as poetry, are markedly late. Neither Rust'aveli, Šavt'eli, Č'axruxaze, nor even the prose *K'art'lis C'xovreba* (*Georgian Chronicles*) pre-date the sixteenth century, therefore it is impossible to say in which script they were originally written. They have all been subjected to centuries of unscrupulous editing, especially Rust'aveli and the *Georgian Chronicles*.

5 “Secular Meter”

It has been widely argued and demonstrated that Georgian religious poetry, both liturgical and non-liturgical, was invariably an imitation of its Greek models. Non-liturgical poetry was almost without exception written in iambic dodecasyllables. Although the Georgian language, at least in its attested stage, never distinguished between long and short syllables, iambic dodecasyllables and occasionally other Greek meters were consistently used until the

40 In the case of religious texts, some exceptions were made, since at a later date lay people could no longer read *Xuc'uri*, and the absolute majority of Georgians still cannot read this script.

41 The exception is David IV the Builder's charter written in *Xuc'uri*.

42 See Zaza Aleksidze, Buba Kudava, Dali Chitunashvili et al., *Dated Georgian Manuscripts: An Album* (Tbilisi: National Centre of Manuscripts, 2015) for multiple examples.

43 Aleksidze et al., *Dated Georgian Manuscripts*, 36.

nineteenth century.⁴⁴ This Greek meter of religious poetry has been often contrasted with the so-called vernacular, epic, or “Georgian” meter utilized in secular poetry, either folk rhymes that have only sporadically survived or one of the three high literary meters: the *P’istikauri*, the *Č’axruxauli* or the *Šairi*.⁴⁵ Of the three meters, *Šairi* became most dominant, due to the tremendous influence of the *Man in the Panther’s Skin*, which is entirely versified in *Šairi*. Since then, practically the entire Georgian poetic corpus has been written in this meter.

There are indeed very few examples of pre-tenth-century poetry written in one of the secular meters. There is however evidence that, while the Greek meter was used for religious purposes, the “Georgian” meters were perceived as epic. In such cases, code-switching occurred. For example, the sixth- or seventh-century Georgian translation of Eusebius’s *Martyrdom of St. Prokopios* includes a verse from the *Iliad* which is rendered in Georgian in a “secular” verse – the *P’istikauri* (a twenty-syllable verse with a tail rhyme), which, as believed by early modern theorizers of poetry, was a literary adaptation of folk rhymes and the earliest of surviving vernacular meters.⁴⁶ Instead of using the original dactylic hexameter which was familiar and widely used in Georgian religious poetry, the author resorted to this vernacular Georgian meter. In the eleventh century, Ephrem Mc’ire also used *P’istikauri* and *Šairi*, a sixteen-syllable rhymed verse, to translate two Homeric quotes.⁴⁷ The hexameter of the original was not mechanically copied and was instead substituted by a Georgian meter. Over time, out of the three meters, *Šairi* became most widely used to render “epic” stories or fragments of such stories. The historical chronicle, *Lives of the Georgian Kings*, written in the eighth or ninth century and edited in the eleventh, includes a quatrain roughly based on Ferdowsi’s *Shahnameh*.⁴⁸ The exact source of the quote is not identifiable, yet it seems

44 For the most comprehensive comparative study of Byzantine and Georgian metrics, see Akaki Urushadze, *beržnul-romauli da k’art’uli metrikiš sakit’xebi* [Questions of Graeco-Roman and Georgian metrics] (Tbilisi: Tbilisi State University Press, 1980).

45 *Šairi* as a meter ought not to be confused with the general term for poetry also *šairi*.

46 Korneli Kekelidze, ed., [Georgian hagiographic texts 2. Keimena] (Tbilisi: Georgian Academy of Sciences Press, 1946), 113. Pavle Ingoroqva, who wrote the most detailed analyses of medieval Georgian poetry, identifies other similar instances of the usage of *P’istikauri* in early Georgian translations of the Bible. Ingoroqva, [Giorgi Merč’ule] (Tbilisi: Sabčota Mcerali, 1954), 547–734.

47 The original observation belongs to Simon Kaukhchishvili, “ep’rem mc’ire da beržnuli lek’s’t’cqobis sakit’xebi” [Ephrem Mc’ire and the questions of Greek versification], *Works of Stalin University of Tbilisi* 27b (1946): 67–74. See, also, Ingoroqva, *Giorgi Merč’ule*, 581–582.

48 For commentary on this passage, see Stephen H. Rapp Jr., *Studies in Medieval Georgian Historiography: Early Texts and Eurasian Contexts* (Leuven: Peeters, 2003), 114–115.

that a poetic adaptation of the *Shahnameh* existed by the time of the quote's insertion. The quote is written in classical *šairi*, as by the eleventh century this form was established as the principal epic meter.

The discovery of poetic graffiti in the interior of the seventh-century church of Ateni, in central Georgia, has challenged traditional literary history, which dated the emergence of secular poetry with its secular attributes (linguistic register, script, meter) to the eleventh century. Since the Ateni Church of Dormition was located on major trade and military routes, it contains hundreds of inscriptions in multiple languages on its façade and interior: Georgian, Armenian, Arabic, Persian, Syriac, and Slavonic. In addition, the eleventh-century frescoes hide a wealth of earlier inscriptions dating to the eighth and ninth centuries. In the 1970s, two short poems were recovered that showed strong anomalies in comparison to what had been taught in Georgian literary theory since the eighteenth century.⁴⁹ Both poems are written in lowercase ecclesiastic script, yet in a register closer to modern Georgian than any text composed in the same period (end of the eighth or early ninth century) or considerably later. Each line consists of seven syllables and has a tail rhyme, a verse otherwise unknown to medieval Georgian writing. The content of the verses is ethical and didactic, apparently written by a local or traveling monk. In addition, although unrelated to these verses, the Ateni church also preserved samples of *Mxedruli* script which antedated the standard theory of its emergence by two centuries.⁵⁰

The discovery of rhymed poetry that pre-dated other known examples by two centuries made scholars rethink the history of the emergence of secular poetry, as well as the modern Georgian language and the *Mxedruli* script. If earlier, the emergence of all three was dated to the eleventh century, since the discovery of Ateni graffiti, it became obvious that the theory of a sudden genesis of secular poetic, linguistic, and graphic registers in the eleventh century is untenable. The Ateni graffiti were also welcome news to those scholars who argued that what we now identify as secular poetry had its roots in earlier folk registers and was not necessarily a result of an overwhelming Persian influence. Moreover, the Ateni graffiti demonstrate that there existed a range of nuances that differentiated meters, linguistic registers, and perhaps even scripts over and above a simple secular-religious distinction.

49 For the edition, see Zaza Aleksidze, *atenis sionis ot'xi carcera* [Four inscriptions of Ateni Sioni] (Tbilisi: Sabchota Sakartvelo, 1983).

50 Zaza Aleksidze, "mxedruli damcerlobis sat'aveebt'an" [The Origins of Mxedruli Script], in Zaza Aleksidze, *Caucasus Christianus*, 3 vols (Tbilisi: National Centre of Manuscripts, 2010), 1: 213–237.

There exist other cases where code-switching appears to be random and does not follow the religious-secular dichotomy: the *P'istikauri* meter was used in a strange case of a versified Lord's Prayer with an unknown date, although included in the collection of a tenth-century church father, Ioane Bolneli. Perhaps the poem was composed in this verse for mnemonic purposes, as the Georgian rhyme was much easier to memorize than the Greek meter.⁵¹ The poem is strikingly similar to the famous quatrains of the prayer of Avtandil in the *Man in the Panther's Skin*, an exquisite yet religiously controversial piece of poetry. Deeply spiritual and religious, the prayer does not mention any particularities of Christianity, such as the Trinity or Christ, one of the principal reasons for its subsequent condemnation. Occasionally, religious authors (such as the tenth-century hymnographers P'ilipe and Ioane Zosime) write in *šairi* instead of the traditional iamb.⁵²

Therefore, while much of this discussion remains hypothetical, what can be argued is that by and large, the form-substance dichotomy with regard to secular and religious style, script or meter seems to be a seventeenth or eighteenth-century projection onto the earlier state of affairs. The reasons why a particular author used a particular register, script or meter were far more nuanced, and did not seem to be codified until the eighteenth century. With the establishment of the printing press in Tbilisi in 1708, debates over which books, in which script, and which style or register to print them were launched. In the eighteenth century, the controversy over the limits of secular and religious literature, and their place in public life is well attested, chiefly in the writings of Antony I and his followers.

6 Greek in Substance, Persian in Form

Even though there is little evidence to support the secular-religious dichotomy projected on the medieval period by eighteenth-century and contemporary literary theory, occasional discussions concerning "substance-form" in poetry still transpire. These few references, however, are far from the overt conflict

51 Donald Rayfield notes that "rhyme, which the inflections of Georgian make almost automatic, grew from a casual weak force – perhaps under the influence of folk poetry, whose pagan imagery underlines many a Georgian hymn – into a primary element, sometimes developing into the homonymic rhymes that were to be a feature of Georgian virtuoso literary versification." Rayfield, *Literature of Georgia*, 27.

52 Ingoroqva, *Giorgi Merč'ule*, 578–579. Ingoroqva lists several other notable exceptions when secular meter was used in religious poetry.

that Marr hoped to find, instead providing evidence for compromise rather than conflict between Persian and Byzantine tendencies.

An example of this can be found in Ephrem Mc'ire's (d. c.1101) writings, one of the founding figures of Hellenophilism. Ephrem's translations, theological commentaries, and insightful colophons are important sources for the reception of Byzantine theology and philosophy in eleventh- and twelfth-century Georgian writing. Ephrem wrote when Georgia's secular elite was immersed in Persian epic poetry and storytelling, while monks embraced Byzantine literature. As well as a variety of other contributions, Ephrem is the first Georgian theorist of poetry to offer an analysis of form and substance in poetry. This occurs in Ephrem's translation and adaptation of Gregory of Nazianzus' gnomic quatrains, which he compiled and titled *One Hundred Iambs*. As pointed out and discussed by Ketevan Bezarashvili, together with other interpolations, Ephrem also altered the original rubric to *Carmen* 1, 2, 33, which reads: Γρηγορίου πόνος εἰμι τετραστιχὴν δὲ φυλάσσω γνῶμαις πνευματικαῖς μνημόσυνον σοφίης.⁵³ A slightly later and a more precise anonymous translator rendered the verse in the following way: "I am Gregory's work, with this quatrain I defend the wisdom to be remembered in the teachings."⁵⁴ Ephrem, however, deviated from the original:

გრიგოლის ვარ მე ტკივილით ნამუშავევ,
ოთხმუკლედისა ჰინდურისა დამცველ ვარ,
მისაცემლად ცნობათა სულიერთა
და სიბრძნისა მის ყოვლად ჭეშმარიტისა
მოსაგსენებელ ღირსებით მოსწავლეთა.⁵⁵

I am Gregory's work done with pain,
I have adopted the Hindu quatrains,
To transfer spiritual knowledge

53 *Patrologia Graeca* 37, carmen 1, 2, n. 33, col. 927. For the detailed discussion and original findings, see Ketevan Bezarashvili, *ritorikisa da t'argmanis t'eoria da prak'tika grigol gvt'ismetquelis t'xzulebat'a k'art'uli t'argmanebis mixedvit'* [The theory and practice of rhetoric according to the Georgian translations of the writings of Gregory of Nazianzus] (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba, 2004), 100–113.

54 Tbilisi, National Centre of Manuscripts of Georgia, MS S 2568, 38. r.

55 For the Georgian quote, see Ketevan Bezarashvili, *bizantiuri da žveli k'art'uli ritorikis t'eoriisa da lek'st'cqobis sakit'xebi antiok'iuri kolop'onebis mixedvit': ep'rem mc'ire, cigni 1* [Questions of the theory and practice of Byzantine and old Georgian rhetoric and poetics according to the Antiochian colophons, Ephrem Mc'ire, 1] (Tbilisi: Ilia State University Press), 91–92.

And true wisdom,
To be remembered by students.

Gregory's original rubric is a justification for resorting to classical verses as a convenient means of rendering supreme wisdom. Elsewhere Gregory provides four other justifications for his choice of classical verses: First, he wished to "restrain his lack of measure" ... "struggling with the meter as I was"; secondly, he wanted to communicate with younger people and the uninitiated "as an enjoyment ... so nothing hinders you in your progress towards the good"; thirdly, "the pagans have greater literary talent than us ... and so for you the wise, we have produced this amusement"; and finally, Gregory admits that, as an aging man, writing verses "gives him some comfort."⁵⁶ Ephrem's metrical rendition of Gregory's argument adapts it to the Georgian context, thus bringing the term "Hindu" into play. Ketevan Bezarashvili and Tamar Otkhmezuri have explained that for Ephrem, "Hindu" stands for foreign, non-Christian, alien, oriental, indeed also Persian, and describes a compromise in form for the sake of substance.⁵⁷ Even though Ephrem does not use vernacular or epic verse to render Gregory's poems, Gregory's concerns were familiar to him and to his age as Persian poetry was becoming increasingly popular.

The introduction of India, as a metaphoric location is a reference to the rising tendency in Georgian writing of transferring the events in distant and eastern lands (India, Arabia, China, etc.), but not in Georgia or neighboring Christian lands. This trope first appears in the *Balavariani*, the Georgian adaptation of the tale of Barlaam and Ioasaph, where the narrative unfolds in India, and which became the source of the Greek and other European versions of the story.⁵⁸ Donald Rayfield classified *Balavariani* as the dawn of secular literature and argues that it is "half hagiography and half romance," both in form (linguistically) and substance. Unlike all other Christian versions, the *Balavariani*'s merit is "the saturation with the fabulous parable fiction of its sources and its reduction of the didactic and circumstantial elements to maximum brevity."⁵⁹

56 For translation, see Caroline White, *Gregory of Nazianzus – Autobiographical Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3–5.

57 A detailed discussion can be found in Bezarashvili, *Byzantine and old Georgian rhetoric and poetics*, 91–92.

58 For the English translation, see *The Balavariani (Barlaam and Josaphat): A Buddhist Tale from the Christian East*, tr. David Marshall Lang (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

59 Rayfield, *Literature of Georgia*, 65–66. See also, Nikoloz Aleksidze, "Translations: From Georgian to Greek," in *The Oxford Handbook of Byzantine Literature*, ed. Stratis Papaioannou (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 219–225.

While the tale takes place in India and most of its content is utterly fictional, the message of the narrative is deeply Christian. Therefore, for Ephrem, “Hindu” is an established synonym for “fictional,” as well as “epic” which was sourced from the neighboring non-Christian traditions.

Indeed, it seems that Georgian epic poetry is entirely unaware of or ignores the Byzantine Acritic cycle, for example, and has not developed an interest in historic epic poetry. All old epic narratives, such as the life and exploits of Vakhtang the Wolf-Head, have survived in prose form and were incorporated into the *K'art'lis C'xovreba* (*Georgian Chronicles*) canon.⁶⁰ By the eleventh century, these earlier epics seem to have fossilized in the canon, and the existence of a parallel poetic corpus is attested only indirectly in a few surviving verses. In the rising new epic prose and poetry (Georgian adaptations of the *Shahnameh*, *Visramiani*, *Man in the Panther's Skin*, *Amirandarejaniani* etc.), the events invariably unfold in distant, and mythological lands. It was specifically this tendency of transposing events in the “Orient” *par excellence*, their ahistorical character and lack of references to Christianity that turned out to be controversial in the seventeenth century. The poetry of the as scholars of Georgian studies classify the seventeenth and eighteenth-century literary production, became markedly “historical,” with their plots unfolding in Georgia, and riddled with diligent Christian references.

7 Rust'aveli's Theory of Poetry

Another, and a much more detailed, discussion of the nature and function of poetry can be found in the prologue of the *Man in the Panther's Skin*. After obligatory praise of an unnamed God, but without mentioning Christianity, the twelfth-century or later author moves on to praise Queen Tamar, his alleged patron. Following that, he dives into a theoretical discussion of the nature of love and poetry and how they are mutually reinforcing. In a typically neo-Platonic fashion, he identifies three registers of love. The first love, called the One, is described in negative terms, as something that cannot be either grasped, uttered, or qualified even by the wise. The second sort of love, although enacted on earth, contemplates and imitates this first love. This love is a theoretical possibility, yet practically unattainable, and only possible in poetic imagination such as his poem. The third kind of love, according to the

60 For a detailed discussion on the epic of Vaxtang, see Rapp, *Sasanian World through Georgian Eyes*.

poem, is purely material, and it is not even love, as it is nothing, virtually a non-being.⁶¹

The classification of love is immediately preceded by a similar classification of poetry. The first kind of poetry is a field of wisdom, meant for divine ears and, as such, extremely beneficial to listeners:

შაირობა პირველადვე სიბრძნისაა ერთი დარგი,
საღმრთო, საღმრთოდ გასაგონი, მსმენელთათვის დიდი მარგი,
კვლა აქაცა ეამების, ვინცა ისმენს კაცი ვარგი;
გრძელი სიტყვა მოკლედ ითქმის, შაირია ამაღ კარგი.

The art of poetry (*šairoba*) is, above all, a branch of wisdom,
It is divine and to be beheld by divinity, and edifying to the listeners.
It is pleasant too if a listener is a worthy man.
In a few words a long discourse is uttered, herein lies the excellency of
poetry (*šairi*).⁶²

Gregory's defense of poetry is echoed in this quatrain, which argues that poetry is superior to all other forms of discourse since it is capable of condensing and presenting great wisdom in a pleasurable manner. Unlike Gregory, however, there is no deliberation on the form versus substance dichotomy, and the author is unapologetic about his choice of verse.

The second sort of poetry is what can be identified as lyric poetry. People allegedly resort to this kind of short poetry-writing because of the lack of skill, and ability to handle lengthy poetic texts. The third kind of poetry is good for parties and merry-making, however, this surely is no poetry and its authors are no *mošaires*. In sum, true *šairi* must be both lengthy and laconic, must deal with divine and epic subjects, and must be some sort of bottomless pit of the Georgian language (*ar šemoakldes k'art'uli* – “His Georgian must not fall short”). Near the end of the segment, the purpose of the poem to follow is revealed:

ჩემი აწ ცანით ყოველმან, მას ვაქებ, ვინცა მიქია;
ესე მიჩს დიდად სახელად, არ თავი გამიქიქია!
იგია ჩემი სიცოცხლე, უწყალო ვითა ჯიქია;
მისი სახელი შეფარვით ქვემორე მითქვამს, მიქია.

61 Rust'aveli, *The Man in the Panther's Skin*, 2.

62 Rust'aveli, *The Man in the Panther's Skin*, 4.

Let everybody know, the one I lauded is the same I praise,
 This is a task that brings no shame at all, but honor to my days!
 The person who is my life is a panther; merciless she preys.
 I've written above the name of my love, through wrapped in veil it stays.

The purpose of the poem, and this kind of poetry, is, therefore, allegorical, to veil the truth behind verses, linguistic acrobatics and “Persian” tales. Evidently the author of the prologue polemicized with his current literary tastes, just as Ephrem tried to circumscribe the limits of the use of secular verses through his adaptation of Gregory’s epigrams. Yet, in the poetic theory of the prologue, there is no opposition advanced between secular and religious poetries. Arguably, the principal object of criticism here is the Persian poetic tradition: on the one hand, he polemicizes with Gorgāni’s *Vis o Rāmin* and Neẓāmi’s *Leyli o Majnun* and the descriptions of erratic, irrational and eventually destructive love between their protagonists, and on the other, the increasingly popular lyric poetry is challenged, introduced in Georgia by itinerant minstrels from the wider Caucasian region. Indeed, later poets faithfully followed the prescriptions of the prologue to the *Man in the Panther’s Skin* – hence the comparative lack of lyric poetry until the end of the eighteenth century, and the propensity to create heavily artificial if not unapproachable linguistic registers that unimaginatively imitated Rust’aveli’s original creation.

It is also in the prologue that we encounter two terms that have since then stood for poetry. *Lek’si* and *šairi* are of very different origins, one is Greek and the other Arabic. *Lek’si* has been attested as early as the first translations of the Bible in its original Greek meaning, yet it was Ephrem Mc’ire who conceptualized the term for the first time. Ephrem interpreted the word *lexis* as a “deep philosophical and theological meaning” of a word or a discourse, as opposed to the word’s ordinary or everyday meaning. *Lek’si*, in Ephrem’s usage, also means literary as opposed to vernacular. Since Ephrem, in ecclesiastic Georgian, *lek’si* has been used exclusively either in its Greek meaning (word, or technical term) or in the sense prescribed by Ephrem: “deep meaning” of a term.⁶³ In the thirteenth and fourteenth-century historical works, we encounter cases of ambivalent usages of *lek’si*, where it is unclear whether it stands for “words” or “verses,” indeed similarly to Greek *hoi logoi*. For example, twice the twelfth-century poet and philosopher Ioane Šavt’eli is referred to as a famous

63 Bezarashvili, *Byzantine and Old Georgian Rhetoric and Poetics*, 134–135.

“sayer of *lek’sis*,” or verses.⁶⁴ Yet in the same historiographic work, *lek’si* stands merely for words.⁶⁵

In contrast to Ephrem’s prescription, in the *Man in the Panther’s Skin*, and in modern Georgian in general, *lek’si* is used in the only meaning that it still has: poem or verses. Since the thirteenth century, *lek’si* and its derivatives, such as *melek’sē* (poet), have been predominantly used in their modern meaning. For example, *lek’s’t’a šecqobit’ tk’ma* (saying verses in order) was a common expression that stood for rhymed versification. By the seventeenth century, during the rebirth of Georgian poetry, the usage of *lek’si* was standardized in its modern sense of rhymed poetry, and more specifically, a group of two or several rhymed verses.⁶⁶

A parallel word for verses and poetry, attested since the thirteenth century, is *šairi*. Along with *lek’si*, it remained the most common word for verse and poetry until it was largely replaced by Russian *poezia*. Yet, in time, *šairi* lost its original meaning and was used with reference to sixteen-syllable rhymed quatrains. In the twentieth century, however, this medieval word lost its original meaning and began to denote folk, improvised, and comedic verses. This raises the question of whether *šairi* and *lek’si* were originally used synonymously or whether they had different connotations. In the *Man in the Panther’s Skin* both terms are used interchangeably and produce identical derivatives for a poet, *me-lek’s-e* and *mo-šair-e*. In one instance, the prologue says:

მო, დავსხდეთ, ტარიელისთვის ცრემლი გვდის არ-შეშრობილი;
მისებრი მართ დაბადებით ვინმცა ყოფილა შობილი!
დავჯე, რუსთველმან გავლექსე, მისთვის გულს ლახვარ-სობილი,
აქამდის ამბად ნათქვამი, აწ მარგალიტი წყობილი.

Come, sit ye down, ye who have been born under the same fate;
let us shed a never-drying tear for Tariel’s sake.
I sat me down, I, Rust’aveli, versified (*gavlek’sē*), my heart I pierced with
a lance.
Hitherto told as a tale, now arranged as pearls.⁶⁷

64 *The History and Eulogy of the Monarchs*, tr. Dimitri Gamqrelidze and Stephen Jones (Tbilisi: Artanuji, 2014), 268.

65 *k’art’lis c’xovreba 2* (The Chronicle of Kartli 2), ed. Simon Kaukhchishvili (Tbilisi: Mec’niereba, 1959), 78.

66 Mikadze, *Studies in the history of Georgian poetics*, 33–36.

67 I chose Wardrop’s translation here, as Wardrop’s rendering of this quatrain is more precise; Shota Rust’aveli, *The Man in the Panther’s Skin*, tr. Marjory Wardrop (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1912), 3.

Here *lek'si* stands specifically for the craft of rhymed versification, which makes the story more agreeable to the listener. Elsewhere Rust'aveli claims to have been commissioned to write "sweet verses" (*lek'sebisa tkbilisa*). In another quatrain, Rust'aveli interchangeably uses both Greek and Arabic terms and criticizes those whose verses are limited and who are unable to generate endless rhymes.

It is now nearly impossible to identify the exact connotations of these two roots, yet based on their distribution in the prologue, one may suggest that Rust'aveli's *lek'si* has lost the original meaning prescribed by Ephrem. Nevertheless, it could be argued that *lek'si* as a "deep" and "philosophical" meaning of a word or discourse, as well as *šairoba* as a "branch of wisdom," is paired with the art of formal rhyming and the necessity to subsume this deep meaning in poetic craft.

8 "Sayer of Evil Verses"

The question, however, remains open: is the prologue along with its theory of poetry an organic part of the poem, or was it added later as a justification and an apology for Rust'aveli's poem? Indeed, judging by the polemic that erupted around Rust'aveli in the ensuing centuries, the latter is more likely. Ephrem's "Hindu" convention is also most famously used in the *Man in the Panther's Skin*, and this was where Rust'aveli's posthumous troubles began. Here events take place in India and Arabia, in distant and mythical lands. The story depicts the friendship between two generals, Arab Avtandil and Hindu Tariel, and their mission to rescue Tariel's bride, a kidnapped princess. Indeed, apart from one single word, there is no reference to Georgia or the Christian world in the entire poem. Rust'aveli's bold rejection of any reference to Georgia and to Christianity became the reason for its subsequent condemnation and occasional prohibition. The prologue announces to the readers that the tale that they were about to listen to, is "Persian" and had existed long before the author put it in verse:

ესე ამბავი სპარსული, ქართულად ნათარგმანები,
 ვით მარგალიტი ობოლი, ხელის-ზე საგოგმანები,
 ვპოვე და ლექსად გარადვთქვი, საქმე ვქმენ საჭოჭმანები,
 ჩემმან ხელ-მქმნელმან დამმართოს, ლალმან და ლამაზმან-ები.

This Persian tale, now done (*nat'argmanebi*) into Georgian,
 Has hitherto been like a pearl of great price cast in play from hand
 to hand;

Now I have found it and mounted it in a setting of verse; I have done a dubious deed.

The ravisher of my reason, proud and beautiful, willed me to do it.⁶⁸

This quatrain has baffled generations of scholars, who tried to make sense of the "Persian story" and the word "*nat'argmanebi*," which in Georgian stands for translation, interpretation, or adaptation. Nevertheless, it is more plausible to read "Persian" as non-Christian or non-Georgian, alien and unsanctioned. The addition of "this Persian tale," if not authored by Rust'aveli, must have appeared soon after the poem's dissemination, and has served as an apology similar to Ephrem's "Hindu quatrain." The opposition to Rust'aveli was born of the long-held conviction that the poem was a Persian adaptation and therefore crypto-Muslim. Many later critiques of Rust'aveli attacked him specifically for his choice of setting and the theologically ambiguous nature of the poem. Along with several defenses and apologies, Rust'aveli's poem has also preserved damning interpolations that overtly attacked the poem as unorthodox, corrupting, and "Persian." Another interpolation of an unknown date, which appears as the opening quatrain of the surviving manuscripts, is even less compromising by explicitly banning monks from reading the poem, thereby betraying the universal popularity of the poem even among monks. This is also the earliest example where secular (*saero*) is used in a negative context and as an accusation against Rust'aveli:

პირველ თავი დასაწყისი ნათქვამია იგ სპარსულად,
უხმოთ ვეფხისტყაოსნობით, არსსა შეიქმს ხორცს არ სულად,
საეროა, არ ახსენებს სამებასა ერთ-არსულად,
თუ უყურა მონაზონმან, შეიქმნების გაპარსულად.⁶⁹

The first chapter, the beginning is said in Persian,
You call it *Vep'xistqaosani*, it makes the flesh of essence, not the spirit,
It is secular (*saeroa*) and does not mention the consubstantial Trinity,
Should a monk read it, he will be shaved.

68 Shota Rust'aveli, *The Man in the Panther's Skin*, 3. For a freer yet more poetic rendition of this and other verses, see Shota Rust'aveli, *The Knight in the Panther's Skin*, tr. Lyn Coffin (Tbilisi: Poezia Press, 2015). The final line *sak'me vk'men saçočmanebi* [I did a dubious act] was misinterpreted by Marjory Wardrop, the poem's first translator, who rendered *saçočmanebi* as "praiseworthy," when in fact it stands for "dubious" and more precisely "morally dubious."

69 Shot'a Rust'aveli, *vep'xistqaosani* [the Man in the Panther's Skin], ed. Giorgi Kartvelishvili (Tbilisi: Martirosov Press, 1888), 4.

The Man in the Panther's Skin was a turning point that decisively changed the course of the history of Georgian secular poetry. For better or worse, Rust'aveli's narrative style and the Rust'avelian quatrains became normative in subsequent centuries. Apart from individual exceptions, virtually the entire Georgian poetic corpus until the end of the eighteenth century was written in Rust'aveli's quatrains, which became the verse of epic poetry *par excellence* and replaced all other verses. From the point of view of versification, Rust'aveli's meter was not particularly innovative. Sixteen-syllable rhymed quatrains are attested since the tenth century and were apparently considered an epic meter. Rust'aveli's achievement was the free alteration of the so-called high and low *šairi*, a technique that became dominant in the Georgian tradition, and no self-respecting poet since the thirteenth century would have written in another meter.⁷⁰ Rust'aveli effectively codified not only the form of epic poetry but also its structure, essential elements, and philosophy which made it such a controversial and often condemned literary genre. Since the fifteenth century, Georgians have been obsessed with Rust'avelian verse, and dozens of imitations have appeared, a development that further fueled the antagonism towards epic poetry as conceptualized by Rust'aveli. Rust'aveli was an object of adulation and hate, as everyone tried to imitate him in their craft of poetry, yet also made sure to avoid the same "mistakes." Perhaps as a response to this criticism and the awareness that poetry was becoming increasingly concerned with matters Persian, a substantial part of the existing Georgian historical corpus was versified in Rust'avelian verses.⁷¹

Since the sixteenth century, eastern Georgia has been heavily influenced, both culturally and politically, by Safavid Persia. Most of Kartli's and Kakheti's princes and kings were educated in Iran, and some even converted to Islam. Eastern Georgian kings were perfectly bilingual and their education was almost entirely in Persian. Yet, paradoxically, it was exactly in the same period that Rust'aveli's poetry was challenged as far too Persian, too fictional, and too religiously ambiguous. The prologue of the *Man in the Panther's Skin* was read as an apology of Rust'aveli, yet not as a very convincing one. While epic poems or lengthy lyric of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries slavishly emulated Rust'aveli in rhymes, versification, poetic metaphors, and other

70 High *šairi* denotes a verse that consists of four four-syllable feet, which is usually read fast, as opposed to low *šairi*, a slowly read verse with six three-syllable feet.

71 See the poetic adaptation of early-seventeenth-century historical events: Giorgi Saakadze, *didmouraviani* (Didmouraviani), ed. Giorgi Leonidze (Tbilisi: Saxelgami, 1939); for the later seventeenth century, see P'ešangi, *šahnavaziani* [Shahnavaziani], ed. Giorgi Leonidze (Tbilisi: Saxelgami, 1935); or a similar early-eighteenth-century poem, Iese Tlashadze, *kat'alikoz-bak'ariani* [Kat'alikoz-Bak'ariani], ed. Ekvtime Taqaishvili (Tbilisi: Sharadze & Co., 1895).

tropes, care was taken to introduce Orthodox Christian passages, appropriate Trinitarian, Christological, and Marian references in the prologues so as not to repeat Rust'aveli's damning religious ambiguity.⁷² The notable absence of early Rust'aveli manuscripts and their dramatic presence since the eighteenth century must be an indication to the rather unstable history of the poem.

Perhaps the greatest poet in the post-Rust'aveli era, the seventeenth-century king, T'eimuraz I of Kartli and Kakheti (r. 1605–1633), for example, criticized Rust'aveli for his "Persian" tales, and non-historical poetry, yet he wrote exclusively in Rust'avelian meter and supplied his poems with apologies and justifications for his weakness towards this "Persian praxis." In the prologue of his *Leil-majnuniani*, an adaptation of Neẓāmī's *Leili o Majnun*, T'eimuraz is exceedingly and rather comically apologetic for writing the poem, expressing the fear that he may burn in hell for this, while hypocritically complaining that no one reads the holy fathers anymore. Hence, he too is forced to write poetry on such abominably fictional and Persian matters. T'eimuraz even refers to Rust'aveli's "this Persian tale ..." quatrain and justifies his obsession with poetry by the disarming musicality of the Persian language:

სპარსთა ენისა სიტკბომან მასურგა მუსიკობანი,
მძიმეა ენა ქართველთა, ვერ ძალმიც მისებრ თხრობანი,
მათ შეწმასნილთა სიტყვათა მინდა მარტივად მბობანი,
აწ გამოჩნდების ლექსითა მიჯნურთა შესხმა-მკობანი.⁷³

The sweetness of the Persian tongue gave the desire to write poetry,
The Georgian language is heavy, I am unable to narrate in it.
I wanted to tell stories easily as they do,
Now you shall see the praise of the lovers in poetry (*lek'si*).

King Archil II (r. intermittently 1661–1698) was particularly concerned with Rust'aveli and his influence. He even wrote a poem, *Dialogue between Rust'aveli and T'eimuraz* (in *šairi*), which contrasts Rust'aveli and T'eimuraz and demonstrates the superiority of the former over the latter.⁷⁴ The principal reason T'eimuraz was superior to Rust'aveli was that he wrote poetry about true events.

72 See, e.g., the prologue to the sixteenth-century sequel to the *Man in the Panther's Skin*, *Omainiani*, and most other epic poetries. K'aixosro Cholokashvili, *omainiani* [Omainiani], ed. Ivane Lolashvili (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba, 1979).

73 T'eimuraz I, *leil-majnuniani* [Leil-Majnuniani], in *Complete Works*, ed. Aleksandre Baramidze (Tbilisi: Pederatsia, 1934), 24.

74 Arč'ili, *Complete Works*, 136–200.

Meanwhile, attempts were made to salvage Rust'aveli from increased criticism and perhaps condemnation. For this purpose, King Vaxtang VI of K'art'li (r. 1716–1724), himself a prominent poet and man of letters, gathered a committee of learned men with the aim of establishing Rust'aveli's authentic text. He wrote a commentary on the poem with apparently one principal aim – to interpret the poem allegorically, as a thoroughly Christian text, and thereby to defend its printing and dissemination.⁷⁵ Yet, the editors made further interpolations to the text, often polemicizing against the author and providing metacommentary on what they considered morally problematic.⁷⁶ In the epilogue, the editors add verses with a reference to King David and try to clothe Rust'aveli in a Christian guise. The introductory quatrain, which prohibited monks from reading the poem and which is present in most surviving manuscripts, was removed from the critical (and first printed) edition of the *Man in the Panther's Skin* of 1712. Instead, the editor added a versified comment to the very end of the poem, saying that the poem “is both religious and secular, for whoever wishes to hear.”⁷⁷

In 1731, Mamuka Barat'ašvili contributed to the debates with a tract on the art of poetry, evidently commissioned by his patron, King Vakhtang. In the introduction, Barat'ašvili follows Vaxtang's lead in portraying Rust'aveli as an ethical and religious writer:⁷⁸

Lek'si is one of the arts of this world ... God must be praised, so that [poetry] is beneficial for the soul. Hymns and iambs are also poetry. But if you speak of evil, it will not be appropriate, instead of praise and remembrance, it shall be condemned ... and the sin will be grave, since it will prompt man to sin and evil, as said by Rust'aveli regarding love between husband and wife and many other divine teachings, as explained by the interpretation [written by] the king [Vaxtang VI]. But some poets have used his [Rust'aveli's] book for flirting, and have versified the divine

75 Šot'a Rust'aveli, *vep'xistqaosani. Vaxtangiseuli gamoc'ema 1712 clisa* [Vep'xistqaosani. Vakhtang's edition of 1712], ed. Akaki Shanidze (Tbilisi: Tbilisi State University, 1937).

76 These have been discussed in detail in Pavle Ingoroqva, *Rust'veliana* (Tbilisi: Saxelgami, 1926), 45–63. Although Ingoroqva's methodology is admittedly not entirely convincing, as he tends to eliminate everything that Rust'aveli could not possibly have said. In addition, Ingoroqva sees an undercurrent of interpolations in the 1712 edition which includes both Rust'aveli's opponents and his defenders.

77 Kekelidze, *žveli k'art'uli mcerlobis istoria* 2, 96. Šot'a Rust'aveli, *vep'xistqaosani. vaxtangi-seuli gamoc'ema 1712 clisa*, 1 and 286.

78 Mamuka Baratashvili, *scavla lek'sisa t'k'misa* [Teaching of the art of poetry], ed. Akaki Khintibidze (Tbilisi: Tbilisi State University, 1981).

writing for fornication, and many others have versified Tatars' fairy tales to flirt with women, damaging the listeners and their own selves.⁷⁹

Vaxtang's project of Christianizing Rust'aveli, however, backfired, and later commentaries on Rust'aveli are even less pleasant. Timot'e Gabašvili (r. 1703–1764), an enlightened bishop and traveler, famously called Rust'aveli's poem mere "Persian gossip": "This Rust'aveli was a sayer of evil verses, who taught evil corruption and corrupted Christianity, and earlier due to their ignorance some people interpreted it theologically."⁸⁰ In the mid-eighteenth century, arguably as a response to Vaxtang's attempt to rehabilitate Rust'aveli, Katholikos-Patriarch Antony I opposed this tendency by creating both an alternative normative theory of poetry as well as a new poetic canon beyond the traditional list of Persianizing poets. Antony's project, the *Cqobilsitquaoba* (Art of Metered Discourse), was a backlash against Rust'aveli's tremendously influential theory and praxis of poetry. Antony's lengthy poem is everything that Rust'aveli's poem is not. Antony purposefully wrote in archaic iambs instead of the long-established Rust'avelian quatrains. Of the seven parts, the first six are dedicated to theological topics: Trinity, the Mother of God, the Cross, angels, apostles, saints, and martyrs, followed by Georgian saints and martyrs, and the history of prominent Georgian kings. Only the last part, which is the core of the poem, is dedicated to the history of Georgian rhetoric, with a focus on poetry. Antony enumerates and praises all the great medieval Georgian rhetoricians and is particularly impressed by those who wrote in verses. The authors are arranged not chronologically but according to Antony's preference, that is to say, from best to worst. He mentions secular poets only towards the end, specifically pointing out that from now on he will talk about "lay poets". The greatest among them were his own ancestors and relatives: kings T'eimuraz I, Arč'il II, Vaxtang VI, and T'eimuraz II. It is only after them that he mentions Rust'aveli with only a few words:

შოთა ბრძენ იყო, სიბრძნის-მოყუარე ფრიად,
ფილოსოფოსი, მეტყუელი სპარსთა ენის;
თუ სამ სწადოდა, - ღმრთის-მეტყუელიცა მაღალ;
უცხო საკვრველ პიიტიკოს-მესტიხე;
მაგრა ამოდ დაჰშურა, საწუხ არს ესე.⁸¹

79 Baratashvili, *Teaching of the art of poetry*, 7.

80 Timot'e Gabashvili, *mimosvla* [Pilgrimage] (Tbilisi: Georgian Academy of Sciences, 1956), 50. Rust'aveli's poem was also called by some late medieval and early modern authors "vain", "futile", "evil deed", "fanciful šairi", "soul-corrupting", and many others.

81 Anton Bagrationi, *cqobilsitquaoba* [Art of Metered Speech], ed. Ivane Lolashvili (Tbilisi: Mec'niereba, 1980), 282.

Shota was a wise man and a lover of wisdom,
 He was a philosopher and speaker of the Persian tongue.
 Had he wanted to be – he would have been a great theologian.
 He was a wonderful poet (*pitikos*) and versifier (*mestixe*).
 Yet it is a shame that his work was futile.

Rust'aveli is followed by even lesser poets, some of whom were his own contemporaries and others who lived earlier. Although they wrote great poetry and were indeed great philosophers, most of their poetry, as Antony says, was "vain".

9 Conclusion

It could be argued, following Bezarashvili's reasoning, that Georgian ambivalence towards *Sparsuli* [Persian] and Hindu may be both a reflection of the learned Byzantine controversy over the term *Hellenismos*, which referred to paganism, as something condemnable, yet also a sign of good style. Arguably a similar dichotomy was retained in the Georgian cultural milieu. The post-thirteenth-century linguistic and literary developments, however, indicate further complications that resulted from the tendencies to differentiate, adapt, and conceptualize specifically Rust'avelian innovation, and to maneuver between the Christian and Persian identities of Georgian literature.

Judging by the surviving evidence, it is relatively obvious that distinct literary forms were established in the eleventh century at the court of the Bagratids that reflected the in-betweenness of the Bagratid court, nurtured by Byzantine and Persian cultures. The tremendous influence of the *Man in the Panther's Skin* eclipsed practically all other types of poetry writing, and set stylistic, linguistic, and thematic parameters for proper poetry-writing. While nothing has survived from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, judging by the writers of the following three centuries, there was a strong sense of legacy and dialogue between new and old poets. Since the fifteenth century, there has been a tendency to create entire poetic corpora and cycles that would revolve around the *Man in the Panther's Skin* and the *Shahnameh*, as their sequels, prequels, and spin-offs. Some of the most successful kings (Vaxtang VI, T'eimuraz I, T'eimuraz II, Arč'il II, and others) patronized such poets and wrote their own poetry, and were involved in the debates as to what literature should look like.

In the early modern era, deliberations about the nature, place, meaning, and importance of poetry as epitomized by Rust'aveli, were a central component of identity and later national discourses among Georgia's literary and political

elites. The debates intensified in the early eighteenth century when the first printing press was set up in Tbilisi, creating a dilemma as to which should be published first, Rust'aveli or Scripture. While Shalva Nutsubidze's theory of secular literature was created at the court of the *Politbiuro* to serve the needs of yet another autocrat (and incidentally also an aspiring poet), Joseph Stalin, the controversy over form and substance, Byzantine and Persian, Orthodoxy and philosophical religiosity, iamb and *šairi* had been ongoing since the dramatic spread of Rust'aveli's manuscripts in the seventeenth century, and regularly resurfaced in subsequent ideological controversies and identity discourses over the definitions of "authentic" Georgian culture.