

Article

When Words Become Voice: Intermedial Storytelling and Identity in the Georgian Folk Tale *Master and Pupil*

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Abstract

This article closely examines the Georgian folk tale *Master and Pupil*, focusing on the intermedial transformation of its sequential narrative structure as an instance of oral storytelling. The tale is analyzed within the broader discourses of performativity, voice, and narrative subjectivity through the lenses of performance theory, media formalism, and the Aarne–Thompson–Uther (ATU) classification system (Type 325). The study reveals a transition in the tale from silence to vocal authority; here, voice functions not only as a means of communication but also as a vehicle for resistance, transformation, and the negotiation of identity. *Master and Pupil* emerges, beyond a magical apprenticeship narrative, as a multilayered performance of disembodiment and symbolic transmission through an intermedial perspective; in this context, musicality and vocality operate as liminal forces. The pupil's acquisition of voice signifies both a narrative rupture and a restructuring of hierarchical relations. Furthermore, the article situates the tale within the broader matrix of the Georgian oral storytelling tradition, demonstrating how recurring motifs surrounding the transformation of voice reflect culturally embedded patterns of media convergence and embodied knowledge. By foregrounding the tale's intermedial dynamics, this study reframes folk tales as a fluid site of aesthetic, cultural, and epistemic negotiations.

Keywords: Georgian folk tale; intermediality; performance theory; oral tradition; ATU 325; narrative transformation; voice and identity



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1. Introduction

In the context of oral cultures, storytelling has historically functioned not only as a means of entertainment and value transmission, but also as a complex form of cultural performance and aesthetic expression. As oral art forms, folk tales have deeply permeated the rituals, memory, and identity of the communities that have created and transmitted them across generations. Within this tradition, Georgian oral heritage offers a particularly rich field of study due to its intricate interaction among spoken narrative, musical elements, and bodily performance. As Nino Tsitsishvili (2009a, pp. 58–60) notes, traditional Georgian polyphonic song serves not only as a mode of musical expression but also as a powerful vehicle of national identity and collective historical consciousness. Similarly, Georgian folk tales emerge as an intermedial mode of expression at the intersection of narration, voice, gesture, and space, reflecting the multilayered relationship between voice, memory, and performativity.

This article aims to examine how oral storytelling functions as an intermedial and performative art form through a close examination of the Georgian folk tale *Master and*

Pupil. Collected and translated into English by [Marjory Scott Wardrop \(1894\)](#) in the late 19th century, this tale vividly illustrates the role of voice and performative discourse in the construction of identity, in the navigation of supernatural encounters, and in challenging dominant hierarchies of power and knowledge. Although the tale lacks explicit references to musical instruments or songs, its narrative operates through the logic of performative discourse as articulated by John Langshaw [Austin \(1962\)](#) in his concept of “speech acts”—where words do not merely describe but enact. When read through the lens of intermediality, this performative dimension reveals the tale’s deep entanglement with sonic aesthetics, embodiment, and symbolic transformation.

The concept of intermediality, as developed by theorists such as [Lars Elleström \(2010\)](#) and Irina [Rajewsky \(2005\)](#), enables an analysis of how different media types—verbal, auditory, gestural, and visual—not only coexist but are functionally integrated within a single cultural practice. This integration is especially prominent in oral storytelling: the storyteller’s voice simultaneously carries linguistic meaning, musicality, and physical presence. [Lars Elleström \(2010\)](#) emphasizes that all media are structured through four basic modalities: material, sensorial, spatio-temporal, and semiotic. In orally performed folk narratives, these modalities are constantly negotiated and restructured, making such narratives paradigmatic instances of intermedial communication. Irina [Rajewsky \(2005\)](#) further extends this approach by proposing that intermediality is not merely a structural feature but also a hermeneutic framework that shapes how we interpret cultural texts.

In conjunction with performance theory—particularly the works of [Richard Bauman \(1977, p. 11\)](#) and [Richard Schechner \(1985, pp. 110–11\)](#)—this article positions *Master and Pupil* not as a static literary text but as a live performative event embedded in a specific socio-cultural context. Bauman’s influential view of performance as “a mode of communicative behavior” underscores the importance of context, repetition, variation, and audience in shaping oral narration. [Richard Schechner \(2013, pp. 52–56\)](#) expands this understanding by framing performance as a ritualized behavior involving transformation, liminality, and cultural negotiation. Viewed through this lens, *Master and Pupil* becomes more than a moral parable: it is a dramatization of voice as a transformative and identity-bearing force.

Within the tale, a young boy is apprenticed to a demonic teacher and is ultimately saved through the power of strategic recognition and oral identification. The tale’s emphasis on transformation—particularly the protagonist’s ability to shift forms and be identified through speech—resonates with broader folkloric motifs of metamorphosis and magical speech ([Thompson 1955–1958](#); the Aarne–Thompson–Uther ATU Typology). While the tale does not explicitly contain musical motifs, it centers around the use of voice as both medium and message—a key intermedial dynamic. The voice in this context is neither purely narrative nor purely aesthetic, but both; it is the agent of identity, resistance, and survival.

Moreover, the Georgian cultural context in which this tale circulates enriches its interpretive possibilities. As Nino [Tsitsishvili \(2009a, p. 63; 2023, p. 278\)](#) and other scholars of Georgian music and folklore ([Folklore State Centre of Georgia 2023](#)) have shown, Georgian oral traditions are marked by a strong continuity between musical, verbal, and performative genres. As [Salma Khadra Jayyusi \(2006\)](#) explores in her comparative study of *Arabian Nights*, oral traditions often create hybrid narrative spaces where sound, repetition, and gesture transcend textuality. This hybrid mode of storytelling aligns with the Georgian tradition, where the performative voice serves not only to entertain but to transmit communal knowledge and spiritual authority.

These traditions do not recognize sharp boundaries between song and speech, storytelling and ritual, or performance and belief. Instead, they reveal a fluid continuum in which voice operates as an artistic and epistemological force—a means of knowing, remembering, and becoming.

Drawing on these theoretical perspectives, this article seeks to contribute to the interdisciplinary discourse on oral performance and intermediality. It is argued that *Master and Pupil* embodies a narrative model in which voice—rather than music per se—functions as a transformative and mediating force. Through a close examination of the tale’s narrative structure, symbolic elements, and performative strategies, this study situates the Georgian folk tale within a global framework of intermedial arts. It offers new insights into the role of oral literature in shaping aesthetic and cultural experiences.

This article addresses three main research questions:

- (1) How does *Master and Pupil* stage voice as a medium of identity and survival within oral tradition?
- (2) In what ways do metamorphosis and intermedial performance reshape recognition and power relations in the tale?
- (3) How can intermedial analysis of this folk tale enrich contemporary understandings of storytelling, media convergence, and cultural memory?

2. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

The interdisciplinary analysis of oral folk narratives requires theoretical approaches that account for their multimodal nature, embodied forms of transmission, and performative effects. In the case of the Georgian folk tale *Master and Pupil*, such an analysis is grounded in two theoretical paradigms: intermediality theory and performance theory. When used in tandem, these frameworks reveal the complex intersections among voice, identity, and transformation within oral storytelling.

2.1. Intermediality as Cultural Convergence

The concept of intermediality has become increasingly central in the study of both contemporary and historical art forms that blur media boundaries. In its most basic sense, intermediality refers to the interaction between two or more media within a single semiotic act (Rajewsky 2005, p. 46). However, this interaction is not merely aesthetic—it alters how the text is received, interpreted, and experienced. Irina Rajewsky (2005, p. 46) distinguishes between three main types of intermediality: medial transposition (e.g., adaptations), media combination (e.g., opera, where different media coexist), and intermedial reference (when one medium evokes another). In the context of oral narratives, this third mode is especially relevant, as spoken words often imitate, reference, or metaphorically embody other expressive forms, such as music, rhythm, or gesture.

Lars Elleström (2010, pp. 15–18) further expands intermedial analysis by proposing a model based on four basic modalities of media: material, sensorial, spatiotemporal, and semiotic. According to this model, oral storytelling is not merely verbal—it is a multimodal event involving voice (sensorial), rhythm and time (spatiotemporal), bodily presence (material), and symbolic meaning (semiotic). In tales like *Master and Pupil*, these modalities interact to create a layered aesthetic experience. Although the tale contains no explicit music, the voice functions musically—it performs identity, negotiates relationships, and triggers transformation. Intermedial resonance is thus not limited to the structural level but emerges as an experiential effect, whereby listeners engage with the narrative through rhythmic, tonal, and gestural cues that simulate musicality without actual instrumentation. This suggests that orality itself should be considered a medium capable of evoking intermedial effects traditionally attributed to music or performance art.

Intermediality, then, is not only a descriptive tool but a critical method for understanding how oral narratives function as artistic acts. The performative speech acts in *Master and Pupil*, including name recognition, magical utterance, and dialogic deception, demonstrate how sound carries not only narrative information but symbolic and emotional resonance.

This aligns with current research in Georgian cultural studies, where oral traditions are recognized as intermedial practices that integrate sound, gesture, and collective memory (Tsitsishvili 2009a, p. 63; Folklore State Centre of Georgia 2023).

2.2. Performance and the Embodiment of Narrative

Performance theory provides a complementary lens through which to understand how oral tales are not simply told but enacted. Richard Bauman (1977, pp. 11–13) defines performance as “a mode of communicative behavior” that is artistically marked and culturally recognized. In this sense, the act of storytelling is a performative event shaped by the narrator’s voice and body, audience interaction, and the contextual setting. Performance involves repetition with variation, the intentional framing of speech, and the stylization of delivery—all of which transform a tale from ordinary communication into a social and artistic act.

Richard Schechner (1985, p. 36) expands this notion by conceptualizing performance as ritualized behavior that mediates between reality and imagination. In his model, performance comprises transformation, liminality, and the embodiment of symbolic actions. This is particularly relevant to the *Master and Pupil* tale, where the characters are not only transformed physically (e.g., into animals or objects) but also perform roles that disguise or reveal identity. These metamorphoses are enacted through speech, voice, and oral recognition, thus blurring the line between narrative and performance. Such voice-driven metamorphoses parallel performative patterns in other oral traditions, such as West African griot storytelling or Middle Eastern narrative singing, where identity and transformation unfold sonically rather than visually.

Furthermore, in performance theory, identity is not fixed but performed and negotiated through culturally marked acts. The protagonist in *Master and Pupil* assumes multiple identities and ultimately reclaims his subjectivity through a speech act that triggers recognition. This moment of oral self-revelation can be read as a performative climax in which voice reconstitutes identity—both in the narrative and in the cultural consciousness of the audience. Such mechanisms resonate with Walter J. Ong’s (1982, p. 33) view of orality as a cognitive and mnemonic structure where sound is central to knowing and being.

In combining these two theoretical frameworks, this study approaches *Master and Pupil* not as a mere text but as an intermedial performance—a live, multisensory act that engages voice, space, memory, and transformation. This perspective allows us to situate the tale within a broader understanding of Georgian oral heritage as a form of intangible cultural artistry, where narrative, sound, and identity coalesce in a unified expressive event.

2.3. Methodological Approach

This study applies a close reading methodology grounded in intermediality and performance theory to examine the Georgian folk tale *Master and Pupil*. The analysis focuses on the narrative structure, symbolic metamorphoses, and vocal performance to interpret how identity and recognition function within an oral tradition. Drawing on the Aarne–Thompson–Uther (ATU) folk tale typology and post-Austinian speech-act theory (Austin 1962, pp. 12–13), this study approaches the tale not merely as a literary artifact but as a form of cultural performance. The tale aligns with the Aarne–Thompson–Uther ATU Type 325, known as *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice*, in which the apprentice escapes the master’s control through a series of magical transformations. This tale type centers on transformation as both the source of conflict and its resolution, thereby exposing archetypal structures of initiation and resistance (Uther 2004, pp. 194–96). Integrating textual analysis with cultural context allows for a deeper understanding of how voice, transformation, and recognition are mediated in Georgian folk narratives beyond sensory and semiotic boundaries.

This mode of analysis is best contextualized within Georgia's distinctive oral and musical landscape, where voice and transformation are deeply embedded in cultural expression. As Nino Tsitsishvili (2009a, p. 63) emphasizes, Georgian oral genres dissolve distinctions between music and speech, ritual, and narrative, producing hybrid forms of expression that resist Western genre classifications.

3. Context: Georgian Oral Traditions and Cultural Memory

The study of Georgian folk narratives requires a nuanced understanding of a rich oral tradition that encompasses not only myth and folklore but also a dynamic cultural practice interwoven with performance, ritual, and collective memory. Unlike written literary forms, Georgian folk tales are inherently performative and intermedial in nature, conveyed through embodied acts that combine voice, gesture, rhythm, and improvisation. These narratives are not fixed literary texts but living expressions of cultural identity, enacted and reshaped across generations within the community.

As Nino Tsitsishvili also emphasizes (Tsitsishvili 2009a, p. 66), the polyphonic structure of traditional Georgian music functions as a profound metaphor that reflects the broader cultural logic of Georgian oral expression. Georgian polyphony refers to a traditional vocal music form based on the simultaneous performance of three independent melodic lines. This layered structure often includes elements of dissonance and drone, producing a dense harmonic texture that embodies both communal participation and individual agency within a unified whole. As a cultural practice, Georgian polyphony is not merely musical: it also serves an epistemological function—operating as a form of knowledge production that encodes memory, identity, and social structure through sound.

Nino Tsitsishvili (2009a, p. 66) also suggests that such polyphonic practice functions not only as artistic expression but as a form of cultural knowledge-making—an oral epistemology embedded in the very act of singing and storytelling. This perspective resonates with Jeremy Foutz's (2010, p. 35) observation that traditional Georgian music constructs "ancientness" and "traditionality" as living categories, allowing communities to engage imaginatively with a shared historical past through collective sound. Polyphony—defined as simultaneously layered voices and often performed in rural or ritualistic contexts—reflects the communal ethos of Georgian identity and its resistance to singular narratives. This musical phenomenon is not confined to performance halls but permeates the very mode in which stories are told, remembered, and embodied. In this context, the folk tale emerges as an intermedial form in which the boundaries between the spoken word, musical phrasing, emotional cadence, and spiritual invocation are fluid and permeable.

This performative quality of Georgian oral traditions is rooted in ancient forms of ritualistic expression, many of which persist today in both secular and sacred domains. As observed in by Jeremy Foutz (2010, pp. 16–31), the performative act of storytelling in Georgia often draws on archetypal gestures, melodic motifs, and symbolic rhythms that connect the present to mythic time. The oral tale functions as a temporal bridge, linking ancestral knowledge to contemporary cultural life. In tales such as *Master and Pupil*, the act of speaking itself assumes a magical quality—the hero's transformation and eventual recognition hinge entirely on the timbre, rhythm, and identity-bearing force of his voice. Thus, vocal performance becomes a narrative agent, enabling not only the unfolding of the plot but the reconstitution of identity and moral order.

Moreover, Georgian oral narratives frequently dissolve the strict genre distinctions upheld in literary traditions. Even a single folk narrative may integrate elements such as prayer, song, magical utterance, or proverb, resulting in a layered and rhythmically dynamic form of storytelling. As noted in *Folklore State Centre of Georgia* (2023), such narratives

exemplify a mode of cultural transmission that may be termed “acoustic memory,” in which tone, tempo, emphasis, and performative rhythm are as essential as semantic content. Similar dynamics can be observed in maqām-based storytelling traditions in the Middle East—where rhythm, intonation, and spiritual invocation are deeply interwoven into performance—as well as in the Iranian *naqqāli* tradition. This phenomenon highlights the global prevalence of intermedial orality and underscores the need to analyze oral folk narratives not simply as linguistic texts but as fully embodied aesthetic events.

In this context, *Master and Pupil* stands out as a remarkable example. Although documented in the 19th century by British folklorist [Marjory Scott Wardrop \(1894\)](#), the tale clearly reflects the structural, moral, and performative patterns of indigenous Georgian oral traditions. It engages the widely recognized motif of magical transformation—particularly through the apprentice’s shifting forms—but frames this theme within a distinctly Georgian cosmological worldview. The tale’s climax does not center on action or direct confrontation but rather on verbal recognition: a moment in which the protagonist regains his humanity through voice and thereby disrupts the power of his demonic master. In this sense, *Master and Pupil* stages voice as both the source of selfhood and the means of liberation.

This perspective is reinforced by the broader cultural role of folk narratives within Georgian national identity. As proposed in the project, oral tales have long functioned as symbolic spaces of resistance, particularly during periods of imperial domination and cultural suppression ([Tsitsishvili 2023](#), pp. 276–78). These narratives preserved and transmitted indigenous linguistic patterns, ethical paradigms, and cosmological perspectives, even when official discourse sought to marginalize or replace them.

As also noted in Jeremy Foutz’s thesis *Ancientness and Traditionality* ([Foutz 2010](#)) project, oral narratives have, over time, evolved into ritualized acts of cultural memory, often performed in communal spaces that serve as unofficial sites of resistance and continuity—especially during eras of Soviet and imperial censorship. In this context, the use of voice in folk storytelling carries not only functional but also political resonance: to give voice is to assert the survival of a cultural tradition under threat of erasure ([Foutz 2010](#), pp. 24–28).

Positioning *Master and Pupil* within the framework of Georgian oral narrative tradition thus entails viewing it not merely as a vehicle of allegorical or didactic meaning but as a living aesthetic performance. This performative act synthesizes memory, ritual, resistance, and identity. These narratives are inherently intermedial and multisensory, requiring analytical frameworks capable of accounting for their sonic, embodied, and affective dimensions. When one engages with this cultural matrix, it becomes clear that Georgian folk tales are not simply a story—they are a vital artistic and epistemological form essential to the preservation and expression of a unique cultural worldview.

4. Analysis: Voice, Transformation, and Intermedial Performance

This section explores how *Master and Pupil* functions as an intermedial and performative narrative, synthesizing oral tradition, symbolic transformation, and acoustic identity. It argues that the tale’s logic of transformation and voice-based resolution closely aligns with the ontological status of sound within Georgian cultural cosmology and folk narratives.

According to the Aarne–Thompson–Uther (ATU) classification (Type 325), this folk tale contains several recurring motifs:

- Demonic Master (ATU Motif D1000): A teacher figure embodying dark or supernatural knowledge.
- Magical Transformations (ATU Motif D500): The apprentice escapes danger through a series of bodily metamorphoses.
- Voice Recognition (ATU Motif H100): True identity is revealed through speech rather than appearance.

These motifs are culturally significant because they dramatize power struggles, survival strategies, and the primacy of voice within Georgian oral imagination, situating the tale firmly within the ATU Type 325 “Sorcerer’s Apprentice” family of narratives, highlighting both its universal and specifically Georgian features.

Before examining the intermedial and performative dynamics of this tale, it is essential to contextualize the narrative within its ethnographic and literary frameworks. The tale is included in Marjory Scott Wardrop’s *Georgian Folk Tales* (Marjory Scott Wardrop 1894), one of the earliest English-language transcriptions of Georgian oral literature. It was first documented in this 1894 collection (see Figure 1 for the original edition). A modern digital reprint (Figure 2) illustrates the continuing circulation and adaptation of this documentation in contemporary publishing formats. Wardrop, a pioneering British scholar and translator, collected the tale during her travels in the Caucasus and translated it from original Georgian oral accounts, preserving much of its structural and stylistic integrity.

The tale centers on a young pupil who is apprenticed to a mysterious master. As the story unfolds, the pupil discovers the master’s sinister identity—which is often read as a demonic or sorcerous figure—and seeks to escape his control. The master, using his magical powers, attempts to destroy the boy by pursuing him through various metamorphic stages, yet the boy survives by continually transforming into different forms. The climax of the story hinges on the pupil’s final transformation into a flower and his eventual recognition by a helper figure through his voice—with themes of survival, identity, and vocal performance.

This tale resonates with the *Aarne–Thompson–Uther* (ATU) classification system, particularly within the *Aarne–Thompson–Uther* (ATU) 325 tale type: *The Sorcerer’s Apprentice* or *The Magician and His Pupil*. This category, which is widespread in Eurasian folk traditions, focuses on narratives where a pupil gains magical knowledge and ultimately overcomes a corrupt or dangerous teacher. Yet the Georgian version introduces unique cultural inflections, especially in its emphasis on voice, transformation, and the interrelation of power and orality. These features make the tale an ideal subject for intermedial and performance-based analysis.

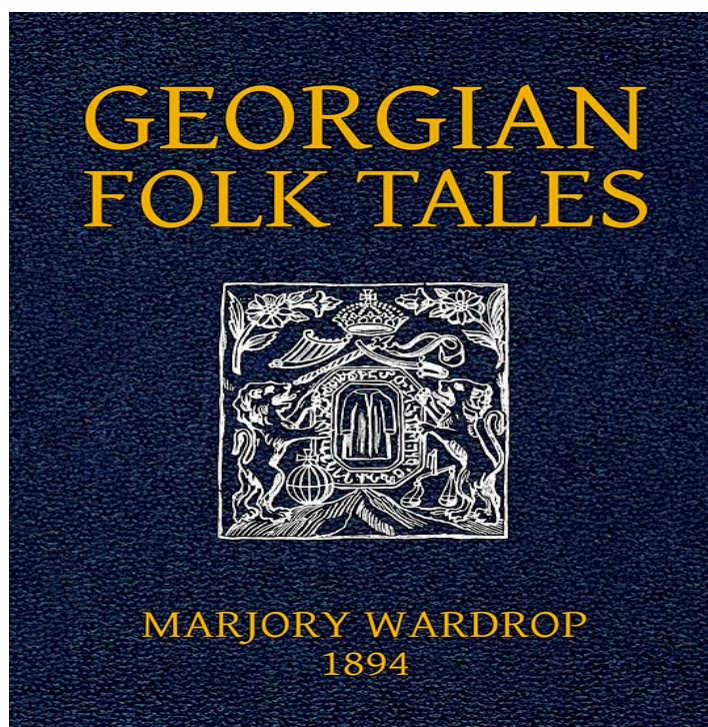


Figure 1. Original cover of *Georgian Folk Tales* (Marjory Scott Wardrop 1894), representing one of the earliest English translations of *Master and Pupil*.

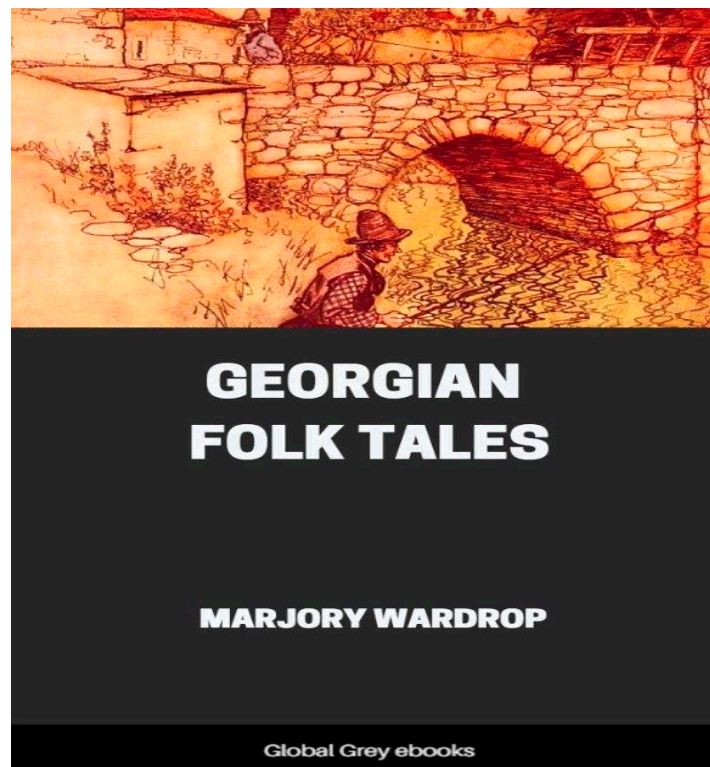


Figure 2. Modern reprint cover of *Georgian Folk Tales* (Global Grey edition, based on [Marjory Scott Wardrop \(1894\)](#)), illustrating the continued transmission in contemporary formats.

4.1. *Voice as a Medium of Identity and Resistance*

In *Master and Pupil*, the motif of the voice transcends its narrative role to emerge as the central medium through which identity is maintained, resistance is articulated, and transformation is ultimately reversed. The tale constructs a symbolic world in which language—specifically vocal performance—is the only reliable means of self-assertion against magical and oppressive forces. From the very beginning, the pupil is silenced by the authority of his master, who teaches him spells and powers but demands obedience without understanding. This dynamic immediately frames language as a site of power struggle, where voice becomes both tool and battleground. The climax of the tale centers on a deeply symbolic act: after a long sequence of metamorphoses—where the pupil becomes a hare, a fish, and finally a flower—the only way he can survive is to make himself known not through appearance but through speech. As recorded in Marjory Scott Wardrop’s 1894 translation, the climactic moment arrives when “*The flower answered and said, ‘It is I, your pupil.’*”

This brief utterance encapsulates the core performative principle: the voice alone reclaims agency, identity, and humanity. It is through sound—not sight—that recognition becomes possible.

It is at this moment that the tale’s intermedial dimension becomes most apparent. The visual cues of identity have been stripped away; recognition must occur through sound. This performative climax, where the protagonist’s voice literally reclaims his humanity, closely echoes John Langshaw [Austin’s \(1962, p. 22\)](#) notion of the *performative utterance*—a speech act that enacts a reality rather than merely describing one. In this context, speech is not merely a form of communication: it becomes an act of reconstruction, of repair. From the perspective of performance theory, this moment demonstrates how oral expression operates beyond being a mere storytelling tool. [Richard Bauman \(1977, p. 11\)](#) defines performance in oral traditions as a “marked mode of speaking” in which meaning is intensified through

formalized expression and social framing. The re-emergence of the apprentice's voice following silence and concealment is a pronounced and ceremonial event—a ritual moment that reverses the master's enchantment and re-establishes moral order. The protagonist is recognized not through appearance but through voice—its *tone*, *timing*, and *emotional* force. Thus, performance is not decorative but a necessary condition for survival and recognition.

This narrative strategy can be further illuminated by Lars Elleström's (2010, pp. 13–14) model of intermediality. Elleström conceptualizes media not as static containers but as modalities interacting across material, sensorial, spatiotemporal, and semiotic dimensions. In this framework, the pupil's voice traverses these modalities: it is *material* (produced by the body), *sensorial* (received through hearing), *spatiotemporal* (unfolding in time), and *semiotic* (bearing-meaning). Even as the boy's body is transformed and disfigured, the continuity of his voice enables the cohesion of his identity. In other words, the tale suggests that what makes us human is not how we look, but how we *sound*.

Moreover, in the context of Georgian oral traditions, where polyphonic singing and recitative storytelling are culturally central, the primacy of voice resonates deeply. As Nino Tsitsishvili (2009a, pp. 66–67) argues, the Georgian voice—especially in its musical and ritualized forms—is both personal and collective. It reflects not only individual identity but also shared cultural memory. The boy's vocal reappearance in *Master and Pupil* may thus be interpreted not just as a personal act of salvation, but as a symbolic gesture of returning to the community's acoustic memory—a collective knowledge transmitted through generations via song, speech, and oral performance.

In resisting the master through voice, the pupil enacts a form of acoustic resistance, a term we might propose to describe moments where oppressed figures reclaim agency through vocalicity. This aligns with broader postcolonial readings of oral literature as a tool of subaltern voice (Spivak 1988, p. 292; Ong 1982, p. 66). In the context of Georgian history—which is marked by periods of imperial suppression—oral narratives such as this can be read as allegories of cultural resilience. Just as the pupil reasserts his being through speech, so too do Georgian oral traditions reaffirm cultural identity through performative vocal expression. Thus, the tale's climax is not merely a resolution to a magical conflict; it is a culturally loaded act that dramatizes the fundamental human need for recognition through sound. It is an affirmation of the voice as a space of being, a bearer of memory, and a vehicle of resistance.

This capacity of the voice to signify beyond language invites a closer look at how transformation itself operates across narrative and sensory levels.

4.2. *Metamorphosis as Symbolic Media Transition*

The transformative logic at the heart of *Master and Pupil* is emblematic of a narrative technique that foregrounds bodily metamorphosis as a metaphor for media transition. In this tale, the pupil evades the magical wrath of his master by repeatedly changing form—into animals, natural objects, and finally a flower. On the surface, these transformations function as a classic folk motif within the *Aarne–Thompson–Uther* (ATU 325) tale type. Yet, upon closer examination, each metamorphosis represents more than a plot mechanism; it is a shift in medium, whereby the body becomes a new expressive form, a new *channel* through which identity is conveyed, concealed, or contested.

Drawing on Lars Elleström's (2010) media modality framework, we can interpret each metamorphic phase as a traversal across material and sensorial boundaries. For instance, when the pupil becomes a fish, his communicative capacities are submerged—literally and metaphorically—into a liquid, non-verbal environment. The voice is lost, and visual recognition becomes the dominant sense. In contrast, as a flower, the pupil embodies stillness and silence; yet, paradoxically, this form becomes the setting for his final act of

vocal recognition. The narrative therefore juxtaposes muteness with expressiveness, visual presence with acoustic truth.

These transformations enact what Irina Rajewsky (2005) defines as intermedial reference, wherein one medium gestures toward the qualities or structures of another. The pupil's transformations point toward other media: the fish evokes the liquidity and silence of underwater space, the animal form recalls the gestural immediacy of bodily performance, and the flower—immobile and voiceless—echoes the visual stillness of pictorial media. The tale, then, stages a kind of proto-media theory, where each metamorphosis asks: What happens to identity, narrative, and agency when the expressive medium changes?

Moreover, these shifts are not merely aesthetic experiments but charged with ontological consequences. The metamorphoses symbolically represent the fragmentation of self that occurs under oppressive power. The master—embodying authoritarian control—tries to obliterate the pupil's individuality by denying him a stable form and identity. In each transition, the boy must not only survive physically but retain a core sense of self capable of reassertion. This echoes Giorgio Agamben's (1999) concept of *bare life*, where the subject is reduced to biological existence unless reclaimed by language and political recognition. The pupil's ability to ultimately *speak*, even from a floral form, restores him as a subject in both narrative and cultural terms.

Culturally, metamorphosis in Georgian folklore often symbolizes not only change but resistance. According to Jeremy Foutz's thesis *Ancientness and Traditionality* (Foutz 2010), transformation in Caucasian narratives frequently signals a passage through ritual danger, requiring the hero to survive in unfamiliar forms while safeguarding internal essence. In *Master and Pupil*, the transformations are not undertaken voluntarily, but out of necessity. They dramatize a series of medium shifts, each more challenging than the last, until the pupil arrives at a form that permits recognition through the most intimate and performative medium available: the human voice (Foutz 2010, pp. 28–30). A cross-disciplinary parallel appears in surrealist visual culture, where the male subject's psychic collapse is staged through the literal fragmentation of the female body (Yüksel 2023, p. 55).

Interestingly, this sequence of changes also mirrors the structure of ritual initiation. Drawing on Arnold van Gennep's ([1909] 1960) tripartite schema—separation, transition, and reintegration—each metamorphosis can be seen as part of the *liminal* stage, in which the protagonist loses his former identity but has not yet attained a new one. Each new form in the tale represents a symbolic death, culminating in the flower—a silent and seemingly inanimate object. Nevertheless, it is precisely from this final form that the apprentice's *logos*—the speaking voice—re-emerges. The tale thus reaffirms that true transformation is only completed when mediated through voice.

When interpreted as symbolic media transitions, these metamorphoses shed light on how oral folk narratives presage issues typically associated with modern intermedial aesthetics: the instability of representation, the role of sensory channels in meaning-making, and the fragility of subjective experience within mediated environments. Moreover, such performances are not solely aesthetic events but also function as tools for negotiating social and political realities. Within this framework, the tale becomes a space of imaginative transformation in which identity can be reconfigured in response to external threats or constraints. Georgian folklore demonstrates a deep awareness of how identity is intrinsically tied to the forms and media through which it is expressed—an awareness that these forms may shift under pressure, yet the core of selfhood cannot be fully erased. These symbolic transitions are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Symbolic and media transitions in *Master and Pupil*.

Narrative Phase	Transformation	Media Form	Cultural Function
Apprenticeship	Human → Animal	Voice → Silence	Moral Disorientation
Pursuit and Escape	Animal → Fish/Bird	Motion and Rhythm	Liminality/ Disguise
Final Recognition	Flower → Human Voice	Voice as Identifier	Reintegration/ Identity Claim

The table maps the apprentice’s symbolic and medial transformation sequence, emphasizing how narrative meaning evolves through voice, form, and recognition. As illustrated in Figure 1, narrative identity in *Master and Pupil* is preserved through symbolic transitions across forms and media, culminating in the recovery of voice. These symbolic transformations unfold not in isolation but within a performative structure charged with cosmological significance.

4.3. Performative Structure and Cultural Cosmology

The structural composition of *Master and Pupil* follows not only a narrative progression but also a ritualistic logic that reflects the spiritual and cosmological worldview inherent in Georgian folk culture. The tale stages a symbolic rite of passage in which the protagonist departs from societal norms, undergoes a series of magical trials and transformations, and ultimately achieves reintegration through verbal self-expression. This narrative structure strongly recalls Arnold van Gennep’s ([1909] 1960) tripartite model of rites of passage—*separation, liminality, and reincorporation*—a theoretical framework often employed to interpret folk narratives as condensed ritual forms.

At the beginning of the tale, the apprentice’s departure with the mysterious master symbolically marks his separation from the safety of the familiar world. This initiatory moment places the character in a precarious position, severed from community, family, and linguistic stability. What begins as a traditional apprenticeship—marked by submission to the master’s authority—quickly becomes a site of moral and ontological threat. As the tale progresses into its liminal phase, the apprentice undergoes a series of bodily transformations and is pursued across different planes of reality. In each of these moments, he occupies an indeterminate state: no longer fully human, yet not entirely lost. The liminal nature of these metamorphoses destabilizes fixed identities and opens a space for symbolic transformation and narrative tension.

This liminal journey is also richly saturated with cosmological symbolism. The figure of the master—endowed with supernatural and morally inverted powers—functions as an archetypal representation of spiritual inversion: a trickster, a sorcerer, or a diabolical force. His pursuit of the apprentice across animal, aquatic, and vegetal realms suggests not merely physical danger but an ontological unraveling. In Georgian folk narratives, including *Master and Pupil*, the conflict between chaos and order, evil and good, is not abstract but enacted through tangible, storied conflicts. As Nino Tsitsishvili (2023, pp. 276–78) reports, such tales often encode ethical dualities through symbolic characters and performative structures. The apprentice’s eventual recovery of his voice signifies not only a return to bodily and communal belonging but also reintegration into a cosmological order that affirms morality, language, and spiritual continuity.

Moreover, this performative journey parallels structures found in religious or sacred traditions, where voice and speech possess creative—even salvific—power. In Georgian Orthodox liturgical practices, for instance, prayers that are chanted or intoned are not viewed as ornamental but as performative acts that enact spiritual alignment. As observed

in Jeremy Foutz (2010, pp. 31–35), these traditions emphasize the ontological efficacy of sound—that is, its role not only in conveying meaning but in sustaining being. The protagonist’s voice in *Master and Pupil* similarly embodies this sacred function: it not only identifies him but reconstitutes him as a moral and narrative subject. His act of speech is a ritual invocation of identity, truth, and existential resistance.

From the perspective of performance studies, Richard Schechner’s (1985, p. 36) theory of “restored behavior” is particularly illuminating. The protagonist’s vocal act—his final utterance following a series of transformations—is not spontaneous but a rehearsed action shaped by prior trials. Each metamorphosis may be read as a rehearsal for the ultimate moment of disclosure when the body is no longer a viable medium, and the voice accomplishes what the body cannot: affirming selfhood and continuity. Schechner posits that both ritual and performance consist of “twice-behaved behaviors”—acts done before, now done again, but infused with new significance (Richard Schechner 1985, p. 36). The apprentice’s final cry, rising from within the flower, marks the culmination of such restored behavior: a return to voice, but a voice transformed through silence and metamorphosis.

The cultural cosmology expressed in this tale goes beyond a simple narrative sequence. It reflects a worldview in which morality, ontology, and performativity are mutually entangled. The protagonist’s journey is not merely a magical adventure but a dramatization of the human condition: how identity can be lost, tested, and ultimately restored through the expressive, relational, and ritual power of voice. Georgian folk narratives such as *Master and Pupil* do not separate aesthetics from ethics or performance from cosmology. Rather, they articulate a holistic cultural vision that frames narrative structure as a reflection of cosmic order and speech as the medium through which that order is both remembered and enacted. Understanding this ritual architecture also enables us to situate the tale within broader intermedial practices specific to the Georgian oral tradition.

4.4. Intermedial Storytelling in the Georgian Context

Understanding *Master and Pupil* as an intermedial narrative requires situating it within the broader traditions of Georgian oral culture. In Georgian narrative tradition, storytelling is rarely confined to purely verbal or written modes. Rather, it emerges as a hybrid performance in which voice, gesture, rhythm, and, at times, musicality are intricately interwoven—functioning as a holistic narrative practice that engages multiple sensory modalities.

Intermediality, as defined by Irina Rajewsky (2005, pp. 43–64), entails the interplay and intersection of different media within a single cultural artifact. In this context, the Georgian folk tale functions as a site where orality, musicality, embodiment, and symbolic imagery converge to produce meaning. *Master and Pupil*, though not overtly musical in structure, is imbued with the aesthetic and performative logic of a culture where voice is inherently polyphonic—both literally and metaphorically.

Georgian oral tradition, especially in rural and highland communities, has long integrated storytelling with musical performance. Even in narratives where no explicit music is present, the rhythmic structure of storytelling, the stylization of voice, and the tonal delivery create an auditory experience akin to musical expression. This implies that the intermedial quality is not bound to actual musical accompaniment but emerges through the auditory aesthetics of speech itself. As Tsitsishvili (2009b, pp. 58–60) emphasizes in her ethnomusicological study *The Echo of the Georgian Song*, traditional Georgian polyphony is not only a musical genre but a cultural epistemology—a way of knowing and transmitting memory through collective, harmonized voice. The aesthetic structure of polyphony, marked by independent melodic lines that converge into a harmonic whole, mirrors the narrative

logic of tales like *Master and Pupil*, where fragmented identities, multiple perspectives, and dissonant forces eventually resolve into a unified moral and narrative outcome.

In this tale, although no song is sung, the narrative rhythm, performative cadence, and especially the transformative role of the protagonist's voice, echo the qualities of musical performance. The pupil's final utterance—his speech from within a flower—functions almost like a solo vocal line, cutting through silence and marking a return to identity and recognition. As [Tsitsishvili \(2009b, pp. 59–61\)](#) notes, in Georgian music, the entry of a voice into harmony often marks a ritual or symbolic return. This logic is mirrored in the tale's resolution, where voice is not merely heard, but received—recognized, interpreted, and integrated into the communal framework.

Moreover, Georgian folk tales are often performed rather than recited. According to [Jeremy Foutz's thesis *Ancientness and Traditionality* \(Foutz 2010\)](#), many rural storytellers incorporate bodily gestures, spatial movement, facial expression, and tonal modulation into their performances. These multisensory elements are integral to meaning-making and function as non-verbal channels of signification. The idea that identity in *Master and Pupil* is preserved through aesthetic memory—the memory of sound, voice, and rhythm—aligns with this performative ethos. In other words, the tale is not simply about metamorphosis and recognition; it is structured by performative, intermedial elements that reflect its cultural origins.

This interpretation aligns closely with theories of acoustic memory in oral traditions. According to recent reports by the [Folklore State Centre of Georgia \(2023\)](#), Georgian oral narratives are not only remembered through content but through the sound of storytelling: the pitch of the narrator's voice, the pace of delivery, and the affective tone. Such characteristics persist across generations, functioning as mnemonic devices. In *Master and Pupil*, the pupil's voice survives transformation not because it retains literal content, but because it is recognized acoustically—its timbre, rhythm, and emotional charge resonate with his identity. Such a mode of representation supports auditory familiarity as the foundation of truth, surpassing reliance on visual or logical evidence. When considered within a wider cultural and historical framework, this narrative logic also functions as a metaphor for cultural resilience. Georgian oral culture has historically served as a medium for safeguarding identity under conditions of imperial domination and cultural erasure. During both the Tsarist and Soviet periods, oral traditions—including storytelling and polyphonic singing—played a central role in sustaining national consciousness. Within this context, the apprentice's survival through voice may be read as an allegory of the survival of Georgian cultural memory—transformed, silenced, under threat, but never entirely extinguished. His voice, like the Georgian song, becomes a vessel of identity that persists through ruptures, silences, and metamorphoses. Thus, the tale offers not only a narrative of transformation but also a dramatization of performative and auditory modes of identity recognition. In this regard, voice functions both as an indicator and a manifestation of an ontological being.

This intermedial dynamic reflects broader themes frequently encountered in Georgian oral narratives, in which auditory and performative elements take precedence over visual or textual ones. The acoustic dimension—particularly the recognition of identity through voice—reveals a deeply rooted cultural belief in the transformative and revelatory power of sound. This phenomenon parallels [Irina Rajewsky's \(2005\)](#) model of intermediality, which posits that intermedial transitions are not merely aesthetic but also assume ontological functions within narrative structures.

Such narratives also align with the ritual and mythical patterns defined by [Arnold van Gennep \(\[1909\] 1960\)](#), wherein transformation symbolizes a transition from one mode of existence to another. In the case of *Master and Pupil*, these transformations are not mere narrative embellishments but rather serve as cultural expressions of liminality, survival, and

recognition. Examining the tale through an intermedial lens reveals its complex structure as both a performed experience and a carrier of collective memory. Similar dynamics can be observed in other oral traditions, such as the narrative structures of *Arabian Nights*, where performance, repetition, and transformation are not only storytelling devices but also strategies of cultural survival and identity negotiation (van Leeuwen 2006, pp. 1–18). Such comparative examples underscore how intermedial oral tales enact resistance and resilience through embodied voice.

Finally, the intermedial structure of *Master and Pupil* allows us to reconceptualize folk narratives not merely as “literature in oral form,” but as embodied cultural performances—a site where sensory, symbolic, and social dimensions intersect. It is not a coincidence that the tale concludes not with visual proof, but with voice. This narratological decision foregrounds a distinctly Georgian cultural logic: that one is heard, not seen; performed, not stated; remembered, not recorded. In such a view, intermediality is not an aesthetic strategy—it is a worldview.

5. Synthesis: Voice, Media, and Cultural Memory

Each metamorphosis in the tale can essentially be seen as a medial transition—a symbolic migration across modes of expression. Through its layered structure, where voice, transformation, performance, and cosmology converge, the tale becomes a rich site for exploring how storytelling sustains, transmits, and transforms collective experience.

The motif of the transformative voice—which is central to the tale’s resolution—functions as more than a narrative device. It embodies a deep cultural logic in which speech and sound are tied to truth, being, and continuity. In a world where visual or material identifiers are lost through metamorphosis, it is the acoustic dimension that preserves identity. This reflects the oral epistemology of Georgian culture, where knowledge and belonging are encoded and passed down through tonal quality, cadence, and performative memory rather than inscription. As Walter J. Ong (1982, pp. 33–77) notes, oral societies preserve their history and ethics “not through externalized memory, but through the body and the voice.” In *Master and Pupil*, the protagonist’s return to selfhood through vocal recognition exemplifies this principle. This underscores that the voice in oral cultures is not an abstract transmitter of meaning but a material, embodied phenomenon. As Adriana Cavarero (2005, p. 13) argues, the human voice is “the audible sign of uniqueness,” grounding individual identity in the very sound of being.

From an intermedial standpoint, the tale embodies the convergence of oral, acoustic, and performative media, which collectively construct a complex experience that resists reduction to text. Each metamorphosis in the tale is, in effect, a media shift—a symbolic migration across expressive forms.

These shifts not only reframe the protagonist’s physical form but destabilize fixed notions of subjectivity. In line with Homi K. Bhabha’s (1994, pp. 36–39) notion of “the third space,” the transformed body becomes a liminal site where hybrid identities emerge—being neither fully this nor that, but continuously negotiated. This medium instability underscores the fragility of identity in oppressive or liminal contexts. Yet, paradoxically, it is this same instability that makes the reassertion of voice so powerful. The narrative affirms that identity is not static but relational and performative, and affirmed through recognition, memory, and sound.

Moreover, in the Georgian cultural context—which is marked by historical experiences of imperial domination and cultural suppression—tales like *Master and Pupil* assume an added symbolic resonance. As highlighted by Nino Tsitsishvili (2023, pp. 276–78), oral forms of expression often served as subtle modes of resistance and preservation. This links to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1988) question: “Can the subaltern speak?” In *Master and*

Pupil, the subaltern subject—the silenced pupil—ultimately speaks not only to survive, but to subvert the authority that sought to erase him. His vocal act is thus a decolonial gesture of narrative self-reclamation.

When national language, history, or literature was under threat, voice and story became sites of survival. The protagonist's final act of vocal expression, after being silenced and transformed, may thus be interpreted as an allegory for the re-emergence of indigenous identity under foreign rule.

The tale also complicates binaries of written versus oral, or literary versus performative. Rather, it affirms a multimodal continuum, where meaning is never singular but always refracted through multiple sensory and cultural registers. This aligns with contemporary intermedial theory, particularly [Lars Elleström's](#) (2010, pp. 11–15) emphasis on the interaction between sensory modalities and semiotic processes. *Master and Pupil* is not a story about transformation; it is a transformation—a media performance that must be seen, heard, and felt.

Finally, this discussion invites a broader reflection on the role of folk narratives in today's globalized and digitized world. While traditional tales are often studied for their historical or symbolic value, their intermedial qualities make them strikingly relevant to contemporary media culture. In an age where storytelling happens across screens, voices, images, and bodies, the Georgian folk tale—which is performed, transformed, and heard—offers a powerful model of how meaning can travel through time, space, and form. The intermedial grammar of folk tales anticipates the convergence with the culture of today. As [Jenkins](#) (2006, p. 95) explains, transmedia storytelling entails the unfolding of a narrative across multiple platforms. Georgian folk narrative, with its fluidity rooted in oral memory, may be regarded as a proto-transmedia form—not designed for passive consumption but for embodied, community-based performance. The intermedial strategies visualized above coalesce in a narrative logic where voice, recognition, and reintegration intersect—thus laying the groundwork for broader theoretical reflections.

6. Conclusions

This study examined the Georgian folk tale *Master and Pupil* through the frameworks of intermediality, oral tradition, and performative narrative, revealing how an ostensibly simple tale carries complex cultural, aesthetic, and ontological dimensions. Rather than a static literary object, the tale functions as a living performance transmitted through voice, bodily gesture, transformation, and symbolic resonance. Its metamorphic structure, dependence on voice-based recognition, and embedded cosmological dualities point to a deeper logic grounded in Georgian oral culture. Within this logic, identity is not fixed but a dynamic formation continuously reasserted through performance across media and modes of existence.

By interpreting the tale as an intermedial performance, this article seeks to move beyond conventional structural or motif-based readings. Instead, it considers the tale as an aesthetic and cultural system in which multiple modalities—oral, auditory, visual, and corporeal—interact dynamically. The pupil's repeated transformations can be understood not only as symbolic acts of survival but also as medial transitions that challenge the boundaries of expression, identity, and recognition. In this regard, the tale dramatizes how meaning can endure under conditions of displacement, silence, and transformation.

When situated within the broader context of Georgian folklore and collective memory, the cultural and historical significance of *Master and Pupil* is also revealed. During periods of political oppression and cultural marginalization, Georgian oral traditions have functioned as vital memory spaces for identity, ethics, and resistance. The surviving voice that emerges through transformation in the tale becomes, in a metaphorical sense, the voice of a nation—silenced but not erased, reshaped but not forgotten. This interpretive framework aligns

with postcolonial cultural theory, particularly Homi K. Bhabha's (1994) notion of the "in-between" space where suppression and expression converge and hybrid identities emerge. The pupil's final vocal assertion exemplifies such hybridity—a subaltern identity both transformed and reclaimed through aesthetic expression. In this light, the tale affirms the interdependence of storytelling, cultural continuity, and freedom of expression.

Moreover, the methodological approach adopted in this study—intermedial and performative analysis—offers new pathways in folklore research that go beyond text-centric boundaries (Lars Elleström 2010, pp. 11–15; Rajewsky 2005, pp. 51–53). Treating folk tales as intermedial performances allows scholars to move beyond motif classification toward understanding how meaning emerges at the intersection of sound, body, and symbolic form. It encourages a return to performance, to voice, and to the sensory dimensions of narrative that remain central in oral cultures. Such approaches not only deepen our understanding of specific tales like *Master and Pupil* but also invite a broader rethinking of how traditional narratives continue to shape contemporary aesthetic and cultural practices.

In conclusion, this article has demonstrated that *Master and Pupil* is not merely a magical tale of apprenticeship but a survival narrative sustained through media. The tale teaches that identity can be fragmented, concealed, and transformed, but is ultimately reclaimed through the enduring power of voice. In this sense, it stands as a compelling example of how intermedial storytelling can embody and preserve the spiritual, ethical, and cultural values of a community, making it a timely subject for interdisciplinary inquiry within the arts and humanities. The tale's multilayered intermediality not only preserves cultural knowledge but also challenges conventional understandings of narrative, memory, and identity within global cultural systems. Beyond its folkloric origins, the intermedial dynamics of *Master and Pupil* resonate with contemporary forms of vocal and transmedia storytelling, from oral history projects to digital performance art, where identity and recognition are still negotiated through sound and multimodal expression.

In this context, *Master and Pupil* emerges as a narrative that both contributes to contemporary theoretical debates and deserves to be re-evaluated in light of cultural continuity and expressive freedom. Beyond textual analysis, this study underscores the value of intermedial and performative methodologies in folklore studies. Approaching oral narrative not as a fixed text but as an aesthetic system allows for more nuanced engagement with multimodal meaning-making processes—especially within underrepresented cultural contexts such as the Caucasus. Future research may investigate how similar intermedial mechanisms operate in other Georgian folk tales, particularly those involving magical transformation, voice, or ritual performance. Comparative studies with non-European oral traditions could further enrich the field by revealing shared or divergent strategies of narrative embodiment.

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