Title: Lahuta e Malcis (The highland lute)
Originally published: Shkodër, Shtypshkronja Françeskane, 1937
Language: Albanian

About the author

Gjergj Fishta (born Zef Ndoka) [1871, Fishtë, near Shkodra – 1939, Shkodra, west Albania]: poet, writer, politician, publicist, educator, and one of the most prominent figures in Albanian cultural life during the first half of the twentieth century. He was educated initially in Franciscan colleges in Troshan and in Shkodra (lt. Scutari, Srb. Skadar). In 1886, Zef was sent by the Franciscan order to Bosnia, where he attended several Franciscan schools. There he came into close contact with the classical Latin and modern West European literary traditions, as well as with Croatian poets Andrija Kacic-Miosic (1704–1760) and Silvije Strahimir Krajevic (1865–1908). He was ordained a priest in 1894 and was formally accepted into the Franciscan order with the name Gjergj Fishta. Soon afterwards, he returned to Shkodra and started working as a teacher in the college of Troshan and as the parish priest in the nearby village of Gomsiqe. In 1899, together with other well-known Albanian activists, he founded the cultural association Bashkimi (Unity), which prepared and published a dictionary of the northern dialect of the Albanian language. By 1902 Fishta had become director of all Franciscan schools in northern Albania. He replaced Italian with Albanian as the language of instruction. In 1907, together with another well-known cultural activist, Shjefen Gjecevi-Kryeziu (1879–1929), Fishta founded the first Albanian public library in Shkodra. He participated in the ‘Congress of Representatives of Albanian Societies’ held in Manastir (Gr. Monastiri, Mac. Bitola) in 1908 and was elected president of the special committee, whose aim was to choose a definitive alphabet for the Albanian language. In 1913 Fishta founded the monthly Hylli i Drites (The day-star), one of the most important cultural periodicals in Albania prior to 1944. Between 1916 and 1919 he edited the cultural biweekly Posta e Shqipnis (The herald of Albania) in Shkodra. Together with other well-known literary and political figures, Fishta participated in the works of the Komisija Letrare Shqipe (Albanian literary commission), which decided that the Latin
alphabet (with several new letters) should become the alphabet for Albanian. He opted for the choice of the northern dialect as the future Albanian literary language, but the ‘Commission’ decided that it should be built on the basis of the vernacular of Elbasan as a compromise between the northern (Gheg) and southern (Tosk) dialects. In 1919 Fishta served as the secretary of the Albanian delegation to the Paris Peace Conference. In 1921 he was elected a representative of the region of Shkodra and the vice-president of the first Albanian National Assembly. Although he served as the superior of the Franciscans in Albania between 1935 and 1938, Fishta withdrew from political and social activity in 1937. He moved to the Gjuhadoll monastery, where he spent his last years editing his literary works. In 1939 he was nominated a regular member of the Italian Academy of Sciences and Arts, although this was perceived as a controversial act. With a total of almost 100,000 verses, numerous articles and prose texts to his name, he was named “the Albanian Homer” during his lifetime. This high position was confirmed by the fact that Gjergj Fishta was the first Albanian to have been nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature. Soon after his death in December 1940, communist rule was established in Albania. The new authorities condemned Fishta, calling him a traitor due to the fact that he accepted the nomination to the Italian Academy of Sciences and Arts. They considered him a reactionary writer, due to the Catholic themes in his works, and an agent of the Vatican due to his educational activities. Nevertheless, people continued to remember Fishta’s works; in Kosovo his poem ‘The highland lute’ has been particularly praised and cherished.

**Main works:** Vierrsha i pershpirteshem i’kthyem shcyp [Spiritual verse translated into Albanian] (1906); Anxat e Parnasit [The wasps of Parnassus] (1907); Pika Voetset [Dewdrops] (1909); Mrziz i zaneve [Mid-day rest of the Zanas] (1913); Gomari i Babatasit. Poem dramatik [The Babatasi’s donkey. A dramatic poem] (1923); Vallja e Parizit [The dance of paradise] (1925); Sh. Luigji Gonzaga. Melodrama [St. Aloysius of Gonzaga. A melodrama] (1927); Shna Ndow i Padues [St. Anthony of Padua] (1927); Lahuta e malcis [The highland lute] (complete edition 1937).

**Context**

By any measure, the 15615-line epic poem Lahuta e Malcis is the *opus magnum* of Gjergj Fishta. The first cantos were published in Zadar in 1905 and 1907, while the final and full edition was published finally in 1937 in Shkodra for commemorating the 25th anniversary of the declaration of Albanian independence.

During his life, Fishta witnessed four crucial periods of modern Albanian history: the end of the Ottoman rule; the early and troubled years of the independence; interwar stabilization under the rule of king Zogu; followed by the occupation of Albania by Fascist Italy in 1939. Lahuta e Malcis refers only to the first period. In his thirty cantos, the poet recounted some of the main historical events from 1858 until the recognition of Albanian independence in 1912. Several authors have used the word ‘encyclopedia’ to describe the con-
tent of the poem, but *Lahuta e Malcis* is more reminiscent of a chronicle delivered in a poetic narrative. It starts with the local skirmishes between Albanian highlanders of the Hot tribe and their Montenegrin neighbors who had attacked them. Fishta evokes the heroic act of Oso Kuka, who, betrayed, wounded and surrounded by the Montenegrins, prefers to blow himself and his wounded comrades up rather than to fall into the hands of the enemy alive. The main corpus of the poem, however, is comprised in the cantos from VI to XXV, which focus on the events of the League of Prizren between the years 1878 and 1880. Episodes describing large battles are followed by scenes of fierce duels between heroes from both sides as well as supra-natural beings, such as the *ora* and *zana* (protective mountain spirits, often imagined as young women) who help them. In the last cantos, Fishta describes the Young Turk revolution, the general uprising in northern Albania, and finally the Balkan war and its outcome—the declaration of the Albanian independence.

Fishta’s work was not the first epic poem written in Albanian, especially during the period of national revival. But, it is arguably the most powerful in terms of literary impact and the most successful in its public reception. He followed the path of two other great poets: Jeronim de Rada (1814–1903) and Naim Frashëri (1846–1900). However, he did not focus on the distant past to create a national hero as his predecessors had done with the figure of Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg (circa 1405–1468). As Fishta himself once mentioned to a disciple and friend, the hero of the *Lahuta e Malcis* is the Albanian nation. The presence of various heroes was interpreted by some scholars as an influence of the ancient Greek epic tradition, especially of *Iliad*, the fifth book of which Fishta had translated into Albanian.

Both in terms of stylistic form and content, *Lahuta e Malcis* was deeply inspired by the Albanian epic oral tradition as depicted in the songs sung with the accompaniment of the *lahuta* (*Srb.* gusle) or the *çifteli*. The richness of language and the means of expression owes very much to this tradition. Moreover, Fishta made use of the most common ‘Albanian’ folk verse, the trochaic octameter, though sometimes it also appears in the form of heptameter. The most important feature, though, that proves the interconnection between the oral epic tradition and Fishta’s poem is the idealization of the heroic life of the Albanian highlanders. The customary law is celebrated as the absolute and ideal mode of social being. In this sense, although different and in many aspects more modern than his predecessors, Fishta nevertheless was under the strong influence of romantic trends.

The publication of consecutive parts of the poem and the final edition of 1937 proved not only the mastery of Fishta as a poet, but also the capacity
that the modern Albanian language offered to poets and writers. Since the very first edition, but especially after the final and complete one, *Lahuta e Malcis* was declared by critics and readers to be a masterpiece not only of the author but of Albanian literature in general.

Almost immediately after the Second World War, Gjergj Fishta was accused of being one of the supporters of the Italian occupation of Albania. His works were banned in their entirety, whereas *Lahuta e Malcis* was frequently labeled a reactionary, nationalistic, chauvinistic and anti-Slavic poem. Thus, he shared the same fate of many of his collaborators and friends who after the war were executed or sentenced to long prison terms. Although during the years of the communist regime the crucial role that the ‘Congress of Manastir’ played in the development of the Albanian national movement and indeed the Albanian language was emphasized, there was never any mention of the president of the ‘Congress’ and the president of the ‘Committee for the Alphabet’, Mid’hat Frashëri (1880–1947) and Gjergj Fishta respectively, since both were labeled as representatives of reactionary and conservative forces. Following the well-known practices of Stalinist propaganda, Fishta’s image was removed from the visual representations of the period together with other ‘respected’ figures. In 1967, during the harshest period of the ‘cultural revolution’ in Albania, even his grave in Shkodra was opened and the remains thrown into the river Drin.

The poet and his work, however, never disappeared from cultural memory in Kosovo, where, even during communist times, he was widely read and idolized. For Albanian youngsters in Kosovo, especially with the coming of the harsh period of suppression between 1980 and 1990, *Lahuta e Malcis* became a source of inspiration, a strong instrument of social, cultural, and eventually national homogenization. It was only with the fall of communism that Fishta reappeared in the literary and cultural scene in Albania, along with many other persecuted and forgotten authors. In December 1990, a ceremony commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of Fishta’s death was organized in Shkodra, although there was still fear of the powerful Sigurimi (Secret police). During the ceremonies the famous actor Ndrekë Luca hesitated in his recitation of a verse from the *Lahuta e Malcis*, but the audience spontaneously filled in the missing line.

RH
The Highland lute

_The invocation from the Canto I_

The Bandits

Help me God as you once helped me,
Five hundred years are now behind us
Since Albania the fair was taken
Since the Turks snared and enslaved her,
Left it in blood our wretched homeland,
Let her suffocate and wither
That she ever live in sorrow,
That, when beaten, she kept silent
Mice within the walls wept for her,
Serpents under stones took pity!
As when first a steer’s yoked under,
Oxbow weighing hard upon it,
There’s no sense at all to prod it,
It will balk, not pull the ploughshare,
Only crisscross fields at fancy,
Furnish trouble for the farmer,
Will refuse to till the furrows
When alone or with another.
So it is with the Albanians,
Under foreign yoke unwilling
To be slaves, pay tithes and taxes.
Always have they wandered freely,
None but God above them knowing,
Never on their lands and pastures
Would they bow before a master,
Never with the Turks agreeing,
Never out of sight their rifles.
They waged war on them, were slaughtered,
Just as if with _shkjas_\(^1\) in battle.

\(^1\) Etymologically this word comes from Latin _sclavus_ and in the past it referred to the Slavic neighbors of the Albanians. Nowadays, especially in Kosovo, it has negative connotations in comparison to the neutral _Slav_, used in Albania and in the standard Albanian language.
Therefore, when Turkish ora’s$^2$
Vigour waned, began to weaken,
When her drive began to crumble,
Russia day by day beset her
And the tribesmen of the Balkans
Newly fled the sultan’s power,
Did the Albanians start to ponder
How to free their native country
From the Turkish yoke and make it
As when ruled by Castriota$^3$.
When Albanians lived in freedom,
Did not bow or show submission,
To a foreign king or sultan,
Did not pay them tithes and taxes,
And Albania’s banner fluttered
Like the wings of all God’s angels
Like the bolts of lightning flashing,
Waving high atop their homeland […]


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$^2$ A female mythical figure that appears frequently in the folklore of northern Albania and Kosovo as a sort of fairy godmother. However, sometimes the *ora* also resemble the ancient Greek Erinies.

$^3$ Fishta refers here to Gjergj Kastrioti Skënderbeg (c. 1405–1468), the medieval figure, who in the second half of nineteenth century became the national hero of the Albanians.