

LITERATURE

Mr. Phillips's New Play

IN this latest drama * Mr. Phillips has produced a poem of exquisite prettiness. If one were asked to designate its chief characteristic in a single word, he would probably say facility, *sprezzatura*, to use the term of Castiglione. From beginning to end the lines follow one another with a facile swiftness, a delicacy of touch and withal an easy regularity, that carry the reader along almost without his attention. Most notable, perhaps, is this *sprezzatura*, this facility of trained skill, in the Prologue on Olympus, where Mr. Phillips has caught something of the half ironical manner of Homer in his celestial scenes and of Goethe in the dialogue between Mephistopheles and the Lord.

But there is more in the poem than mere facility, admirable as such a trait may be in comparison with the tortuous style of so many striving versifiers. There are, scattered through the pages, a number of descriptive passages of really unusual beauty and refinement,—passages that will linger murmuring in the ear for more than a day with something of the remembered delight of a summer vacation by the sea. Twice Ulysses in his words to Calypso tells of the beauty of her sea-girt isle, as if the author were eager to heap to overflowing the measure of these literary gems. "I'll drift no more upon the dreary sea," says the enchanted mariner:

"Here would I be, at ease upon this isle
Set in the glassy ocean's azure swoon,
With sward of parsley and of violet,
And poplars shivering in a silvery dream,
And smell of cedar sawn, and sandal-wood,
And these low-crying birds that haunt the deep."

And again, when Hermes has awakened in him the longing for his home and wife, Ulysses cries out to the goddess:

"[In a wild burst.] Then have the truth; I
speak as a man speaks;
Pour out my heart like treasure at your feet.

This odorous amorous isle of violets,
That leans all leaves into the glassy deep,
With brooding music over noontide moss,
And low dirge of the lily-swinging bee,—
Then stars like opening eyes on closing
flowers,—
Palls on my heart."

Here, indeed, the beauty and the defect of Mr. Phillips's work are brought together in narrow compass. Can anything be sweeter than the line: "*And low dirge of the lily-swinging bee*"? It is a beauty which makes of the whole poem an exquisite picture. But, when the first impression fades and you pause to reflect, could any words be more utterly inappropriate in the mouth of one who is describing what palls on him? and could any speech be written more utterly in contradiction to the stage direction: "*In a wild burst*"?

One would like not to say it, but it is perfectly evident throughout the play that Mr. Phillips is looking for opportunity to display his descriptive talent and has too little interest in the sorrows and joys of his characters. Once or twice, notably in the recognition scene between Ulysses and Telemachus, there is the pulse-beat of real feeling, but in general the lines leave behind no sting of passion, or energy, or brooding on human affairs. Judged by the standard of great poetry, the drama is a palpable failure. There is much prettiness, but no dramatic knot and no construction, no conflict of desire with duty, or will with will, or human will with fate. The whole second act, which no doubt affords the scenic artist opportunity to display all his skill, is thrust into the drama without the slightest justification in plot or human interest. We read through the act awaiting at every line the mystical word which will give some reasonable motive for this descent into Hades, but the word never comes. We are convinced against our wishes that the poet has his eye solely on spectacular effect, and, if the truth must be told, this, despite the many beauties of Mr. Phillips's writing, is the final impression left by the whole play.

* ULYSSES: A DRAMA IN A PROLOGUE AND THREE ACTS.
By Stephen Phillips. New York: The Macmillan Co.
\$1.25 net.