

# The Literature of the Day

## Ulysses \*

feeling into the lives of the characters in the ancient tale.

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This is the strongest work its author has yet given us, and will take a high place among the great dramas written in English. Its theme, drawn from the most modern in feeling and therefore the most universal of the epics of the ancient world, must have proved overwhelming to an author of less power and skill. Of Stephen Phillips and this play it is pleasant to say that he is greatest in the greatest opportunities, rising easily and powerfully to meet each climax of human feeling as it presents itself.

Mr. Phillips's strength and skill are shown in his masterful selection from the bewildering variety of scenes and incidents of the epic. He is never led astray from the dramatic unity which he has determined upon. He knows the stage as an actor knows it, and here, if anywhere, his swift movement and suppression of detail, useful in the theater, leaves the reader cold. And the weakest element of the play, however effective for the stage, from the same view-point of the reader, is the supernatural machinery.

In the crises of action he holds us spell-bound by harmonies of verse and insight into thought and passion. In Calypso love and jealousy, the awed and reluctant obedience of a god to fate, the pangs of renunciation, the dignity of sorrow are wonderfully blended and brilliantly contrasted with the reawakened home longing of Ulysses. Penelope is not less subtly and powerfully drawn. And if it is Ulysses the home lover rather than the warrior and wanderer who is portrayed, that is simply one of the self-chosen limitations of the dramatist.

The prelude is in the council of the gods upon Olympus, and is written in rhyming couplets. But the body of the play introduces us to the nobler and deeper harmonies of blank verse, in the use of which Mr. Phillips often comes not far behind the great masters of that strangely varied music. Calypso tempts with the promise of immortality, and Ulysses answers her in praise of death—a favorite theme with the author:

I would not take life but on terms of death,  
That sting in the wine of being, salt of its feast,  
To me what rapture in the ocean path  
Save in the white leap and the dance of doom?  
O death, thou hast a beckon to the brave,  
Thou last sea of the navigator, last  
Plunge of the diver, and last hunter's leap.

To one who knows the Odyssey it will be a pleasure to follow the rapid action of this drama, with its interpretation and variation of familiar scenes. To others we advise that they make the play an introduction to the great world of the epic. The two illustrate in a most interesting and profitable way the difference between epic and dramatic aims and methods. And if the companionship seems unfair to the more modern work it must be remembered that the Odyssey comes to the English reader through the medium of a translation, while in the drama a true and great poet speaks to him in his mother-tongue, and brings unconscious warmth of modern thought and

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\* Ulysses, by Stephen Phillips. pp. 178. Macmillan Co. \$1.25.