CHAPTER IX
CONCLUSION
I  Maugham's Place in British Drama: His Own Estimate

An endeavour has been made in the foregoing chapters to study the themes and technique of the plays of William Somerset Maugham. In the first chapter the background of Maugham's dramatic work was outlined. In Chapters II and III the themes and the technique, respectively, of his early plays were discussed. Chapters IV and V were devoted similarly to the second volume and Chapters VI and VII to the third. In Chapter VIII a general survey of the major themes and technique was attempted linking them to the dramatist's personality. The purpose of this Chapter is to place his entire dramatic work in its proper perspective in the vast pageant of British drama.

Maugham had an uncanny knack of viewing himself objectively as a third person. He had

"no wish to make myself out more sensible than I was."  

He had trained himself to accept

life and people on their own terms.  

He believed that

"we are the product of our genes and chromosomes, and there's nothing whatever we can do about it ... All

we can do is to try to supplement our own deficiencies."^3

This attitude not only qualifies him to set up as a critic of himself but also explains his diffidence in his estimate of himself. In his later years he often mused on the extent to which he would be remembered as a writer. In one of such candid reflections he says,

"I think^4 one or two of my comedies may retain for some time a kind of pale life, for they are written in the tradition of English comedy and on that account may find a place in the long line that began with the Restoration dramatists and in the plays of Noel Coward continues to please."^4

A little later in the same book he mentions the 'slender baggage' already referred to in the first chapter (p. 8).

On the other hand, Maugham's assessment reveals a mixture of diffidence and modesty which, at the age of looking back, is not uncommon among writers. For example, Graham Greene^5 reminisced at the age of 66 in the following vein,

"I think I have accomplished a little bit and I've failed a good deal. I've written about two or three good books."^6

---

3 Robin Maugham: Somerset and All the Maughams (New York, 1966), p. 54.
4 A Writer's Notebook, p. 287.
5 Greene was a great admirer of Maugham whose Don Fernando he greeted with the remark, "I have never read a book with more excitement and amusement." L. Brander: Somerset Maugham: A Guide (London, 1965), p. 96.
6 Israel Shenkar: "Graham Greene at 66", The Times of India (Bombay, September 18, 1971).
In considering Maugham's estimate of his own position in the British dramatic tradition, it should also be remembered that it reflects the reaction of the critics to his later plays that was often unfavourable. His tremulous expectation is based more on what the theatre-goers of the thirties thought of his plays rather than his objective view of them as a critic. That is why he limits his hope to 'one or two comedies' and does not include the last plays that owed their creation to his irrepressible urge to express himself but did not achieve the popularity the comedies did.

II Maugham's Contribution to Comedy

Maugham's comedies belong to two types, farcical and social. Lady Frederick, Mrs. Dot, The Unattainable and Home and Beauty are farcical, and Jack Straw, Penelope, The Land of Promise, Our Betters, The Circle, The Constant Wife, The Breadwinner, and Caesar's Wife are social. The farcical comedies are his special gift to the British theatre in the brilliant tradition of Oscar Wilde's The Importance of Being Earnest. Indeed this tradition dates back to Shakespeare's farces like Merry Wives of Windsor and The Comedy of Errors. In Shakespeare's multi-sided creation the roots of most later developments are traceable. The distinction between farce and comedy is exemplified in him in plays like The Comedy of Errors on the one hand and As You Like It on the other. The former evoke unmixed laughter and end in merriment without conveying any further meaning; the latter have laughter as a
prominent element, end happily and convey a meaning. A close scrutiny shows how rare the former type is in the whole range of English drama. Not till *The Importance of Being Earnest* do we come across another comedy which reveals in its own elegant shell of wit, humour and fantasy. It is here that the authentic pedigree of Maugham's *Mrs. Doro* and *Home and Beauty* is to be discovered.

This pure farcical comedy must be distinguished from other types of comic drama. With the Shakespearian farce it has only a cousinly affinity; it differs from the former in its preponderance of intellectual wit and total disregard of moral values. In the comedy of manners, typified in Congreve's *The Way of the World* (1700), the play generally commences to the gay tune of wit and repartee, but by the time it reaches midstream, it gets bogged in intrigue, and the curtain last falls to the accompaniment of a pale moral. The full transportation from the region of social and moral propriety to the environment of merry and frivolous distortion is unknown to the comedy of manners. Moreover, elements like the dark machinations of a Mrs. Marwood or the pitiable ambivalence of a Lady Wishfort are common in it but are foreign to the make-believe world of the farcical comedy.

Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) does attain full commitment to frolic but harbours tender and honest sentiment, and glances back to Shakespeare's love-and-intrigue comedies like *Twelfth Night* rather than to the comedy of
manners or farcical comedy. Sheridan's *The Rivals* (1775) and *The School for Scandal* (1777) are attempts towards an unmixed farcical verve, but the moral and emotional nuances and satire make them comedies of manners. Cazamian indeed remarks that Sheridan did not dare to disappoint the public completely in its sentimental expectation.\(^7\)

*The Importance of Being Earnest* is thus the only prominent earlier play comparable to Maugham's *Mrs. Dot* and *Home and Beauty* in the whole-scale abandon to gaiety and the closed circuit of farce. And a worthy successor in this narrow domain is perhaps yet to see the light of day. A. C. Ward's contention,

"Somerset Maugham bridges the gulf between Oscar Wilde and Noel Coward,"\(^8\)

is correct to the extent only of witty dialogue, for in Coward the total, deliberate absence of social implication is perhaps not found even in the gayest plays, like *Hay Fever*, *The Young Idea* or *Private Lives*.

The perennial appeal of Maugham's farcical comedies is evident from their popularity at the periodically staged performances.

When *Lady Frederick* was revived in the austere forties, critics were well


disposed towards this 'period piece'.
How pleasant to see a comedy moving with leisured elegance in a confidently frivolous world, where luxury is taken for granted!  

A sustained atmosphere of narrow, self-centred enjoyment with no suggestion of its juxtaposition with the real world of usual emotions is the crux of the farcical comedy perfected in The Importance of Being Earnest, Mrs. Dot and Home and Beauty. Diverting incidents, absence of sentiment, voluble characters, and witty, humorous and sprightly dialogue are essential ingredients of this literary species, but a central aloofness from normal values and propriety is its soul. Mrs. Dot and Home and Beauty fulfil these criteria and constitute the precise extent of Maugham's distinctive contribution to British farcical comedy.

Of Maugham's social comedies Jack Straw, Penelope, The Land of Promise and Caesar's Wife deal with real modern problems. They belong to the broad tradition of British social comedy reaffirming the faith of society in humanism (Jack Straw, The Land of Promise) and the sanctity of institutions like marriage (Penelope and Caesar's Wife). Although they do not proclaim a new or rare genre, they are superb examples of their kind, comparable to Shaw's Candida; the comedy in England would have been poorer had they not been written.

9 Cordell: op. cit., p. 219.
Of the remaining comedies, Our Betters, The Circle and The Constant Wife, the first two are among the best modern comedies of manners. They are the plays that have attracted the attention of the critic and the literary historian most (cf. Ch. I, pp. 2-3 supra). J. W. Marriott expresses the critical consensus when he says,

"Our Betters and The Circle, for example, are modern comedies of manners, and belong to the great tradition."^10

Edward Albert calls The Circle a true comedy of manners and his best play.  

With the same play in view, Allardyce Nicoll, however, says that Maugham 'largely failed'.^12 On the contrary, Carl and Mark Van Doren assert that neither Wilde nor Shaw provides examples of the comedy of manners as brilliant as Maugham's.  

Comparative estimates are often a matter of subjective preference, and Maugham does not lack scholarly admirers like Alan Reynolds Thompson who declared him in 1946 to be one of the greatest comedists now living.  

Leaving aside comparative and superlative epithets, it may be

---

positively asserted that Maugham's contribution to the comedy in England is substantially rich, varied and compelling.

III Maugham's Contribution to Contemplative Drama

The general trend in criticism to pigeonhole Maugham as a master of comedy tends to bypass his work in other fields of drama. One of the aims of the present comprehensive enquiry is to view his dramatic work as a whole and in its proper perspective. The Unknown, The Sacred Flame and Sheppey are his contemplative plays that project well-reasoned argument on such perennial subjects of human curiosity as God, religion and morality. As pointed out in Chapter I, Maugham's precept for ideas in drama is that they must be translated into emotions, and in The Sacred Flame he provides a magnificent example of it. The argument in the play is intrinsically wedded to the action which in its turn casts far-reaching shadows on the lives of the persons involved. It is thus contemplative drama par excellence, a model of unified impact on the reader's head and heart. It can hold its own with the best of Shaw's plays like St. Joan in its intellectual effect. The methods of the two are, however, different; whereas Shaw uses wit and humour to coat the thought-content, Maugham employs a murder-mystery to the same end. The Sacred Flame is memorable in the annals of modern

15 p. 27.
contemplative drama for its proper weightage to profound thought, arresting structure and touching sentiment.

IV Maugham's Contribution to Tragedy

Out of Maugham's two tragedies, East of Suez and For Services Rendered, the latter is deeply moving. Edward Albert says that Maugham offered realistic tragedy in A Man of Honour and the much better For Services Rendered, but the former does not attain the true tragic level; it is just melodrama. For Services Rendered is Maugham's only successful tragedy, and a monumental one. It is a product of the creative artist's social commitment. Maugham relentlessly gave himself free rein in it to unburden his mind and refused to adapt it to popular sentiment. He relates the minor saga as follows,

"Any dramatist will see how easily the changes could have been made. The characters had only to be sentimentalized a little to affect their behaviour at the crucial moments of the play and everything might have ended happily. The audience could have walked out of the theatre feeling that war was a very unfortunate business, but that notwithstanding God was in his heaven and all was right with the world. ... But it would not have been the play I wished to write."17

16 A History of English Literature, p. 549.
Many sensitive writers were stirred by the unprecedented holocausts in this century that were all the more shocking because mankind seemed to be on the threshold of a new prosperous utopia just when the first war started. This and the colossal annihilation of civil and military personnel alike changed the traditional perspective of war, and the mood of anger and disenchantment burst forth in all channels of writing. To pick up a few examples of representative plays, of which there were many, may be named R.C. Sherriff's Journey's End, Maugham's For Services Rendered and Coward's Postmortem. Journey's End is a realistic portrayal of the fighter's stark frustration on the battlefield, whereas the other two plays probe into the wounds of the soul the bleeding from which knows no stopping. It is characteristic of Shaw's eccentric grain that he was roused by the soldier's lot only to the extent of penning Arms and the Man, and was cool as a creative writer to the catastrophic world wars. In Postmortem Coward introduces the supernatural element, as Shaw does in St. Joan and Maugham in Sheppey, to indicate the depth of the malady, revealed in such utterances as

"Nothing's happening, really. There are strides being made forward in science and equal sized strides being made backwards in hypocrisy."

For Services Rendered is differently conceived. It is a

straightforward, realistic picture, unique in its moral indignation and sense of full-scale destruction of helpless innocents and values. In Sydney's plan to shout from house-tops against war when another comes there is a ray of patient wisdom gleaned from experience. It anticipates the line of popular uprisings against war (a regular feature of recent public reaction to war the world over), provides an outlet, however small, to the pent-up unrest, and ensures the tragic stature of the play. Through this play Maugham added a notable tragic dimension to the common man's peevish but stifled voice against war.

Both in his contemplative plays and tragedy Maugham secures his deep impact in the frame of traditional technique. Terence Rattigan singles out these plays when he says about the theatre of the thirties,

"Admittedly it contained much that was ill-written, stupid and bad. But it also contained much that was good. To select just a few examples, it contained the later and best plays of Somerset Maugham ..." 19

V Maugham's Achievement as a Dramatist

It would be appropriate to conclude this study by summing up Maugham's achievement as a dramatist. As a first step

the charges generally levelled against him may be considered.
As for the themes of his plays Maugham has often been blamed
for their cheapness and triviality. Vis-a-vis his early
plays he tells us,

"The more popular press praised their
wit, gaiety and theatrical effectiveness; but found fault with their
cynicism; the more serious critics,
on the other hand, fell very foul of
them. They found them cheap and
trivial. They told me that I had
sold my soul to Mammon."20

It is easy enough to deal with the charge of triviality.
First, it is confined to the early plays, and cannot be urged
against the later ones. Secondly, the plays accused of
cheapness were all farces and light comedies that are by
their conception trivial; to blame them for what is their
very essence is to miss their whole point.

Thirdly, and this is significant, the charge had its
root in Maugham's commercial success and is arbitrary, for
it is wrong to equate commercial success with deficiency in
literary merit as the illustrious example of Shakespeare shows.
In fact, as the great Sanskrit poet, Kālidāsa, declared,

Drama is probably the only diversion
shared by people of diverse tastes,21

21 नाट्यम् भिन्नरुचि जनास्य बहुधा पयेक्ष समाराधनम्।
and if a dramatist is able to please diverse tastes, it is by itself no mean achievement, provided he does not do it by appealing to their baser instincts.

Maugham himself dilated on the issue in the preface to the second volume of his Collected Plays:

"It appears that Bernard Shaw was a commercial dramatist when he wrote St. Joan and an artist when he wrote Back to Methuselah. What are you going to think of Man and Superman? When it was first written it was very distinctly uncommercial; did it cease to be a work of art when ... everyone concerned made a good deal of money out of it?"22

It is curious that critics find it difficult to equate popularity with excellence. With amusing inconsistency, however, they are delighted if a play by T.S. Eliot, Graham Greene or Archibald MacLeish gains popular fervour.23

That is why Noel Coward cautions budding writers that a young playwright who believes that it is possible to achieve critical acclaim and a successful career is doomed to disillusionment.24

22 p. xv.
23 Cordell: op.cit., p. 219.
Just as riches are generally associated in the common mind with dubious practices, box-office hits are often looked down upon as cheap freaks. In evaluating Maugham’s achievement as a dramatist the right approach would be to assess quality independently of the popularity of his plays. If *The Way of the World* is hailed as a masterpiece despite its failure in its day, Maugham’s masterpieces should be recognized as such despite their success.

The second charge levelled against Maugham is of cynicism. Cynicism, M. K. Naik points out, may be regarded as a tendency to disbelieve in the sincerity or goodness of human motives and actions, and secondly, as a habit of expressing this disbelief by sneers, sarcasms, and captious fault-finding, arising from a lack of sympathy for erring humanity on one hand and from a feeling of superiority on the other.\(^\text{25}\)

It should be understood that a mere cynical character or two in a play are not enough to sustain the charge of cynicism against it or against its author, unless they are given an upper hand and the whole environment of the play smacks of cynicism.

As pointed out earlier (Chapter II, p. 83), Maugham’s first play, *A Man of Honour* (1898-99), ends on a cynical note, but it is a minor one and too insignificant to be considered

in the context of his overall achievement. In *Our Betters* there appears at first sight to be some ground for the charge of cynicism, for in that play Pearl Grayston, an immoral pleasure-seeker, never comes to grief. But, on closer scrutiny, two factors militate against the charge (vide pp. 156, 161 supra). First, there is the 'good' group of Americans and Englishmen that is disillusioned with and deserts Pearl summarizing in the last sentence the healthy attitude to her breed,

"They're not worth making a fuss about."

Secondly, the dullness and emptiness in the life of Pearl and her set are indicated in the third act through their ridiculous subservience to the dancing master. Seen in this light, *Our Betters* is absolved of the charge of cynicism.

In *The Breadwinner*, also accused of cynicism, the prevailing mood is of boredom and not of cynicism. The benumbing sensation of exhaustion afflicts the husband who decides to quit his family and causes the release of similar sensations in his wife and her friend, both married for years. But when he is face-to-face with his friend's daughter proposing to elope with him he puts his foot firmly down: this assertion of moral values eschews any potential for cynicism in the play although the younger generation in it does present a cynical front.

26 P. 278.
To set the score more than even, there are lovable portrayals of kind, humanitarian persons in Maugham's theatre who consider charity its own reward. The Golightlys in Penelope, Freeman in Smith, Arthur and Violet in Caesar's Wife, Mrs. Tabret in The Sacred Flame and Sheppey are the more prominent of them. Thus, the charge of cynicism against Maugham's drama does not appear to be supported by the text of the plays and may be rejected.

As for his dramatic technique, Maugham is often blamed for not trying new experiments. This charge is also undeserved for two reasons. He did successfully employ various technical devices, like the introduction of music in Caesar's Wife, of gorgeous spectacle in East of Suez, of formal language in The Sacred Flame, and of hallucination in Sheppey, although, admittedly, they were not startling breakaways from tradition. Secondly, between tradition and experiment Maugham was, by temperament and choice, largely on the side of tradition. His talent was conducive to excelling in existing frames rather than inventing new ones.

It will be relevant to mention here that if Maugham's detractors have been numerous, so have been his enthusiastic admirers among writers and critics. Cyril Connely praised his virtues of style: lucidity, simplicity and euphony.\(^{27}\) He also described Maugham as

the greatest living short story writer,
and, without any qualification, a great
writer.\textsuperscript{28}

Desmond MacCarthy, Walter Pritchard Eaton and Max Beerbohm
are among the authors and commentators who endorsed the
merits of Maugham's early plays. Cordell gives a long list
of them. Most of his plays have been filmed and televised,
and many rank among favourite television hits.\textsuperscript{29} The pair
of tireless researchers, Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson,
paid Maugham the compliment of compiling his \textit{Theatrical
Companion} on the lines of their earlier volumes on Shaw and
Coward. The kudos won by Maugham's individual plays have been
referred to in this dissertation. It is true that the 'new
critics' tend to consider him superficial, and, worse, to
neglect him, mainly because of his indifference to new forms
and techniques; but as against this, there are avid readers
who would

elbow aside Mister Wilson (Edmund Wilson,\textsuperscript{30}
the 'new' American critic) and think nostalgically of captivating plays such as \textit{Lady
Frederick}, \textit{The Circle} and \textit{Our Betters}.\textsuperscript{31}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{28} Cordell: op.cit., p. 138.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 229.
\item \textsuperscript{30} In his strong disapproval of Maugham in \textit{Classics and
Commercials} (New York, 1955, pp. 319-26) he has nothing of
consequence to say on Maugham, the dramatist.
\item \textsuperscript{31} The review of Robin Maugham's \textit{Somerset and All the
Maughams}, op.cit., in \textit{The Illustrated Weekly of India
(June 19, 1966), p. 43.}
\end{itemize}
Ups and downs are not uncommon in the fame of writers. Already there appears to have been a revival of a Maugham lobby with an author like Graham Greene emphasizing his oeuvre, and a critic like G. Wilson Knight pointing out that Maugham's strength lies in his emotional honesty, and calling The Sacred Flame his masterpiece, rather than one of the comedies.

In making an appraisal of Maugham's achievement in drama it is necessary to compare him with major dramatists. Ben Jonson's conception of the humours puts his comedy in a class apart, but as a social satirist he has a worthy descendant in the Maugham of Our Betters and The Breadwinner. With Congreve Maugham has much in common. Congreve's cerebral wit is an obvious model for Maugham's, and the Comedy of Manners to which Congreve set a tone in his The Way of the World was enriched by Maugham in the modern setting in his Our Betters and The Circle. With Oliver Goldsmith's tender and light comedy Maugham's Penelope has close affinity, and his Caesar's Wife belongs broadly to the same class though it is not quite as playful; Penelope, indeed, 'stoops to conquer' her straying husband back. With Sheridan, again,


33 The Golden Labyrinth (London, 1962), p. 381. New interpretations of his work are also being advanced. For instance, Robert L. Calder's W. Somerset Maugham and the Quest for Freedom (New York, 1972) (which does not discuss Maugham's plays at length) views it as a preoccupation with the escape from bondage and concentrates on the novels Of Human Bondage and Cakes and Ale and the Ashenden stories.
Maugham shares, in his farcical and social comedies, his mastery of gay epigram and funny situation. Wilde's tradition of total farce in *The Importance of Being Earnest* is continued by Maugham in his farces. While it is true of Wilde, vis-a-vis his exceptional instinct for repartee, that when he subordinated it at all to social seriousness (*A Woman of No Importance*) his whole art suffered as the heavy touch on both epigram and moral in that play testify, in Maugham the farcical sparkle is effectively tempered by social content as seen in *The Circle*.

In the twentieth century Shaw and Maugham meet on the common grounds of society comedy and the drama of ideas. Whereas Maugham's *Caesar's Wife* and Shaw's *Candida* are informed by the same spirit of charity and balance in love and marriage, Maugham's *The Unknown* and *The Sacred Flame* are inspired by the same missionary zeal to propagate views that was Shaw's lifelong dramatic motivation. Maugham's affinities with Noel Coward are close and many and will presently be discussed. On close comparison it appears that whereas the older writer is a master of drama as literature, which at the same time is eminently stageworthy, the younger is one of drama as theatre.

---

With the modern verse comedy, too, Maugham's comedy has distant affinities. As for Eliot, Caesar's Wife and The Cocktail Party share the theme of the tensions in modern marriage. It is interesting to note that in relation to his The Lady's not for Burning, Christopher Fry declared that he set out ... to write a play that would be first cousin to an artificial comedy, verse being his form of artifice. Fantasy and eccentric verse, the comic ingredients in Fry, can be juxtaposed with the fantastic situations and prose repartee in Maugham's farces. Of both one may say, as L.C. Knights has said of Restoration wit, that the verbal pattern is quite unrelated to an individual mode of perceiving, that the words "have an air of preening themselves on their acute discriminations." What Maugham achieves in the traditional mould of farce Fry does with the fantastic use of word, image and rhythmic patterns. To bring the story up-to-date, subtle affinities are discernible in Maugham's total farce and the recent Theatre of the Absurd. Viewed from the angle of normal values Victoria and her two husbands in Home and Beauty do sound

36 Ibid.
absurd just as the two slaves 'Waiting for Godot' do. In Martin Esslin's words,

> If we identified with the figure of farce who loses his trousers, we should feel embarrassment and shame. If, however, our tendency to identify has been inhibited by making such a character grotesque, we laugh at his predicament. ... 37

It may be recalled that Bertolt Brecht's *Drums in the Night* has the same basic situation of a long-lost soldier returning suddenly as Maugham's farces *Home and Beauty* and *The Unattainable* do. Having, as they do, some similar situations, the total, calculated blackout of meaning is common to Maugham's farce and the Theatre of the Absurd, though the spirit of the Absurd drama is far different from that of a farce like *Home and Beauty*.

As shown in this rapid survey, Maugham, with his wide-ranging dramatic creation, touches most major British, and some European, dramatists at some point or other. This, in itself, is a measure of his signal achievement.

One of the marks of greatness in a writer is his influence on other writers: Maugham is not devoid of this. In 1939 Evelyn Waugh proclaimed him

> the only living studio master under whom one can study with profit. 38

---

In 1940 George Orwell struck a personal note and declared, "I believe the modern writer who has influenced me most is Somerset Maugham, whom I admire immensely for his power of telling a story straightforwardly and without frills."\(^{39}\)

Many dramatists have paid Maugham the tribute of emulating him. The trend-setting influence of his *Our Betters* has been noted earlier (p. 162).\(^{40}\) Noel Coward met Maugham as early as 1917, and at a time when Noel was just about to start his career as a playwright he found in Maugham 'one of my immediate gods of the theatre'.\(^{41}\)

In some Coward plays themes and designs from Maugham are echoed. *Fumed Oakes* shows similarity of conception with Maugham's *The Breadwinner*. The *Vortex* is reminiscent of Maugham's *Our Betters* in its social satire and some of its characters. Tom in *The Vortex* is a social parasite like Algy in Maugham's *Smith and Clay* in *Our Betters*. In *Bitter Sweet* the melody unites Dolly and Vincent in a bond of love in much the same way as that in *Caesar's Wife* unites Violet and Arthur.

As Allardyce Nicoll points out, Frederick Lonsdale works best

\(^{39}\) Ibid., p. 199.


in the Maugham style. His satire of modern life in plays like *Spring Cleaning* and *The Last of Mrs. Cheney* reminds us of Maugham's work. In the latter play a sentimental conclusion mars what might have otherwise been regarded as a worthy partner to *The Circle*. 42

In Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* music is similarly introduced, and Maugham has gone on record saying he liked it. 43 The fact that the well-known French writer, Francoise Sagan, was described recently as a latter-day disciple of Somerset Maugham, 44 particularly in her first play, shows that Maugham's impact permeated to a considerable extent and over a wide area.

Like most writers Maugham, the dramatist, has his limitations. Some subjects of everyday human interest, like politics and economics, did not, on the whole, interest him. His limitations on this score have been outlined in the preceding chapter. The modern man's sense of all-round futility that has found expression in writers like T.S. Eliot seems to have eluded him. He cannot therefore be called the spokesman of the age in a broad, representative sense. New aspirations with their restless urge to burst out in new areas


and techniques did not, by and large, inspire him. Living and working among moderns he essentially remained traditional. On the technical side he had little gift for such literary graces of the imagination as lyricism, for which his themes, in any case, did not provide much opportunity. It is significant that, unlike some of his contemporaries in fiction and drama, he was not a poet. While he did write joyous farces and serious drama, he did not visualize the possibilities of tragi-comic drama, flashes of which are found in Shakespeare in scenes like the Porter's in *Macbeth*, the gravediggers' in *Hamlet* and the Fool's in *King Lear*, and in the modern Theatre of the Absurd that transcends the categories of comedy and tragedy and combines laughter with horror.\(^45\)

Even after accounting for these limitations, what remains is undoubtedly a substantial achievement. Having contributed some nine masterpieces, Maugham's place in the front rank of British dramatists is assured in not one but

\(^{45}\) *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 401. Maugham does establish an alignment of furtive manner with wicked intention in Leonard Ardsley in *For Services Rendered*, but that merely adds a dimension to his character, and does not take the play into the realm of the tragi-comic. Such a creative result would normally arise from a commitment like Ionesco's who has "never been able to understand the difference between the comic and the tragic" (*The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 187), or like the following: "When the impact of tragedy is strongest comedy also will be more cogent." Ivor Brown's review of Walter Kerr: *Tragedy and Comedy in Drama* (London, Summer 1968), p. 55.
five departments. In Mrs. Dot and Home and Beauty he has given us lively farces with their uncompromising negation of social and moral norms. Penelope, The Land of Promise and Caesar's Wife offer stout reaffirmation of the healthy values of stable family life - a pressing social need in these days of tottering sexual morality. In Our Betters and The Circle Maugham has provided the British theatre with the most brilliant examples of the modern comedy of manners. In The Sacred Flame he achieved signal success in putting across a philosophical view without sacrificing dramatic interest, indeed through the medium of it. Maugham represented the mute millions the world over when he achieved in For Services Rendered one of the most impressive indictments of war on the British stage.

As for the dramatic technique, Maugham at his best achieves unity of effect in plot, characters and dialogue. His cool command of dialogue and sparkling wit are a rare distinction. Many of his creations like Penelope, the Golightlys, Norah, Lady Kitty, Mrs. Tabret and Sheppey, are unforgettable triumphs of characterization. The areas he selected in the theatre he unmistakably enriched, and at his best wrote nothing without making it a memorable achievement.

The uncommon combination in Maugham's drama of commercial success, artistic excellence and versatility puts him in the Shakespearian category. In Maugham criticism no single feature is perhaps more remarkable than his frequent coupling
with Shakespeare. R. H. Ward's remark on *Sheppey* vis-a-vis *Hamlet* has been mentioned (Ch. VI, p. 234). Sir John Squire in his *Shakespeare as a Dramatist* (1935) called the last scene of *Sheppey* a truly Elizabethan scene. In his *Shakespeare* (1949) Ivor Brown applies to him Maugham's precept that popular drama and original thought seldom go together, and defends his choice of the precept by saying,

"For Maugham is not only the possessor of a probing and philosophical brain; he is himself a true follower of Shakespeare in the workshop: a successful and practical dramatist."  

Projecting the Edwardian scene, a critic writes,

"Like Barrie, indeed like Shakespeare, Somerset Maugham wrote with an eye to the stalls, circle, pit and gallery of the Establishment; ... in fact both were smoothing the way for the avant-garde."  

Comparisons are manifestly odious where Shakespeare is involved, for others must 'abide the question' unlike him, and one cannot indeed thrust the roomy mantle of Shakespeare on Maugham's - or anyone else's - shoulders. Shakespeare's all-embracing world-view, his uncanny penetration into human

47 Ibid., p. 16.
psychology, his tragic vision, his powerful imagination and his poetic gift are obviously not to be found in Maugham. Yet in his versatility and variety, his comic gift and his ability to combine popular success with lasting artistic achievement in the field of drama, Maugham reminds us of the great Elizabethan. Referring to Keats's claim, "I think I shall be among the English poets when I am dead", Matthew Arnold said, "He is, he is with Shakespeare." Of Maugham's claim to be among the British dramatists - a claim he himself with his innate modesty never made - one could say, "He is, he is with Shakespeare."