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 **George Herbert, Privative Evil, and Philip Massinger's *The City Madam***

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Massinger's *The City Madam***

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Evil, as you may know, does not exist. St. Augustine told us that sixteen hundred years ago and nearly all of Christianity – Calvinist and Catholic alike – has been content to believe it ever since, though most individual Christians have long since forgotten that they do. Fortunately, we have J.K. Rowling to remind us. Remember how Voldemort became Voldemort? By Tom Riddle trading his substantial humanity for the insubstantial power of evil. That is why Voldemort exists as we see him in the *Potter* books: a malignant wraith borrowing the bodies of his followers, his soul in fragments, one invested – after the manner of Milton’s Satan – in his serpent, the others hidden in jewels where they can be isolated and killed. Rowling’s command of theology should not be underestimated.

For Augustine and the theodicy which descends from him – which is to say, pretty much all of it – evil cannot exist because, if it did, God would have to have created it. In order to save the omnipotent perfection of God, therefore, he must insist that evil has no substantial reality. *Malum est non ens*: evil is non-being. It is a gap in, not a part of, the creation: the absence of something that ought to be there, as sickness is the absence of health, cold the absence of warmth, or darkness the absence of light. This does not mean that it does not exist in the phenomenal sense: like sickness and darkness it has effects and accidents, such as coughing and bumping into things, but it has no essential being. It is thus a state of privation, marked in fallen humanity by the progressive loss of our original and proper nature that Augustine calls privation, a psychological and physical degeneration that manifests itself as grotesque. Remember, for a particularly famous example, the degeneration of Satan in *Paradise Lost* from his original grandeur to something hiding in the body of a toad.

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Strictly or Platonically speaking, evil cannot be real because it is fundamentally a turning away – Augustine’s term is *aversio* – from God conceived of as the source of all reality, not to mention all truth and all life. If you make that turn, you can only be left with illusion, falsehood, and

death. And theater. Losing one's *ens*, one's essence, one increasingly becomes a shell, an act without an actor, a center-less performer; in short, *lago*. Having no reality of its own, evil can only manifest itself by imitation of the real. Hence, the anti-theatrical prejudice, also originating, for Christian purposes at least, in Augustine, that associates acting with evil. At the same time, that inner spiritual emptiness manifests itself in the hunger that is the core of *cupiditas*: the attempt to make oneself real by the consumption of material possessions and earthly powers. Remember the obsessive hunger, literal and figurative, that consumes Faustus.

Aversion is, of course, a doubly absurd choice: Satan has literally nothing to offer and, pitted against omnipotence, cannot win. The choice cannot be rational. Evil, on some level, is always stupid, always self-destructive, and also actually or potentially comic. "The fallen angels," Augustine says at one point in *City of God*, "were made for the others to laugh at" (Bk. 11, ch. 34).¹ That is why stage devils so rapidly evolved into vices. Try, for that matter, to think of a Renaissance machiavel who is not, at bottom, a doomed clown.

In this essay I will argue that Herbert's *The Temple* and John Massinger's *The City Madam*, both emerging a few months apart in the early 1630s, represent an important stage in the evolution of the Augustinian doctrine of privative evil toward its present curious status as both a largely forgotten idea and a fundamental tenet of Christian orthodoxy, shared by Catholics and Calvinists alike. Herbert retains the doctrine in its traditional form but makes it marginal to the range of religious experience he chooses to portray in *The Temple*. Massinger retains the tropes of privation but translates them into the terms of commercial materialism.

Marginal as...

ARTHUR LINDLEY

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and Philip Massinger's *The City Madam*

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