

# The Enigma of Political Self-Destruction in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*

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**Abstract**— Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is typically recognized as a play which represents orthodox beliefs in early modern England. Concurrently, the vestiges of subversion in the play have not been unheeded. There have, as such, been attempts to demonstrate how certain incidents in the play may have destabilized the dominant ethical values in Elizabethan England. In this essay, I intend to re-examine the socio-political undertones of the play and to demonstrate how our reconfiguration of the protagonist's death in *Doctor Faustus* may afford us a novel reading of this play. Essentially, I underline the possibility of construing Faustus's self-destruction by drawing upon politico-theological, other than, eschatological conceptions. I argue that Faustus's death, on two grounds, is political; first, it demonstrates the subject's audacious claim of sovereign authority to decide on his own life; second, the protagonist's declaration of potentially destabilizing intentions for socio-political reform precedes his decision for self-destruction via a demonic pact. I explain how our reconceptualization of Faustus's death can not only shed light on certain facets of the enigma of self-destruction in the play, but underscore the play's pertinence to our contemporary world where the question of suicide and its significations have afforded momentum to various discourses on the subject's political agency.

**Keywords**—Faustus, political theology, religion, self-destruction, subjectivity

## I. INTRODUCTION

Literary critics usually conceive of Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, written around 1590, as a subversive play depicting the life of a rebellious protagonist. Simultaneously, they acknowledge that the work's dissentient undertones are more or less contained within the contours of early modern Christian thought. This state of indeterminacy or, in other words, the perpetual tension between conformity and subversion in the play has precluded the assertion of definitive arguments in support of either the play's "restrictive religious orthodoxy" or its relation to "non-religious controversies" (Deats, 2015, p. 93). It is claimed, upon theological grounds, that Marlowe's Faustus meets a conventional eventuality, an everlasting damnation occasioned by his pact with the devil. From a secular perspective, however, the downfall of the protagonist in *Doctor Faustus* appears to be a consequence of his quest for individualism; in other words, damnation is inherent in Faustus's persistence on being iconoclastic (Watt, 1996, p. 47). The relation between

individualism and Faustus renders the play more representative of Protestant faith, for it is in Protestantism that people are believed to be endowed with free volition so as to determine their own salvation or damnation. In other words, man's eternal life is not determined by his devotion to the dogmas of the Church, but by his own decisions and deeds (Hedges, 2005, p. 3). There are, on the contrary, arguments which substantiate the possibility of salvation for Faustus, for no mention is made as to his truncated funeral; nor are there, in the last scene of the play, any sinister exclamations by either Mephistopheles or Lucifer. Instead, upon his tragic death, what overwhelms the stage is a mixture of sorrow and silence (Hoelzel, 1985, p. 327).

Some critics have a vivid penchant to argue that Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is fundamentally a theological play than a political drama. Dutton argues that the official censor was more concerned with the politics of religion than with its theological aspects; hence, the official censor could hardly be offended by "a play like *Dr. Faustus*,

where the religious issues are broadly apolitical" (2000, p. 77). Transgressions, in *Doctor Faustus*, are quintessentially theological or ethical. A case in point is the kissing scene between Faustus and Helen in the fifth act which is considered as demonic, for Helen is a succubus, and as such, Faustus's implied coition with her is demoniality, a cardinal sin which inflicts eternal damnation upon Faustus (Marcus, 1996, p. 53). Homoerotic overtones in *Doctor Faustus* are the other instances of moral subversion and unorthodoxy in the play. In enumerating the extent of eroticism in Marlowe's play, Wootton (2005) mentions that Faustus's liaison with Helen concurrently evokes three types of sexual perversion: with a woman, with a demon, and with a boy as it was, in Shakespeare's age, forbidden for women to play on the stage, and female roles were obviously played by young boys (p. xviii).

What is particularly at issue in regard to *Doctor Faustus* is that the political significance of the play is substantially overshadowed by the edifice of moralistic readings of the erotic intimations. Cox argues that the reference to the splendor of Lucifer implies the play's "homoerotic" sentiments toward "male beauty" (1993, p. 50). Hammill's conviction is that Marlowe is a "political thinker" (2008, p. 291); yet in his scrutinizing of the permeation of political notions in several of Marlowe's plays, the critic mentions Faustus only in relation to his being "seduced by a Helen of Troy" (p. 308). The medieval didacticism of *Doctor Faustus* has been overemphasized in several studies; the play, "in short, teaches us to adhere to traditional Christian behavior rather than to practice the unlawful things that exceptional minds give themselves to" (Barnet, 2010, p. xiii).

In general, the myth of Faust or the "Faustian tradition is not without shades of darkness, for it characteristically portrays some modes of transgression against ethical and religious norms" (Safaei, 2018, p. 30). Nonetheless, despite the violation of ethical codes in the play, one can arguably surmise that Marlowe could not have been heedless to the orthodox expectations of his audience; yet beneath the dramaturgical conformity of Faustus, one cannot utterly decline the existence of "a stalking horse for defiance" (Cox, 1993, p. 47). Hence, despite several emphases on the apolitical nature of the play, Cox's intimation of the possibility of a subtle political defiance in *Doctor Faustus* encourages me to explore the possible facets of political resistance in the play. To this end, I scrutinize the synthesis of a few interrelated notions in the play. If we, as Cheney argues, conceive of Marlowe as a playwright whose work displays "how a freedom-seeking individual is oppressed, always to annihilation, by

authorities in power" (2004, p. 16), then we might feel, in the context of recent literature on the state of political suicide in our contemporary world, the urgency of reconfiguring our conception of *Doctor Faustus* not necessarily as a play depicting an overreaching Renaissance man who incurs perdition, but as the allegory of a proto-suicide with political significations. To put this another way, Faustus's broadly assumed self-incurred damnation is intrinsically suicidal and politically subversive. Hence, I argue that our inquiry into the enigma of self-destruction in *Doctor Faustus* reveals some measure of congruity with the politics of suicide in our contemporary world where resort to some mode of self-destruction may be conceived of as not essentially sacrificial or anomic but a mode of protest against political absolutism. All references to *Doctor Faustus*, in this essay, are based on A-Text, edited by Bevington and Rasmussen (1993).

## II. MARLOWE AND POLITICS

It is commonly lamented that the interpretation of *Doctor Faustus* is entrapped in the vicious circles of hermeneutic approaches and as such in the abyss of biographical narratives of Marlowe's life (Erne, 2005, p. 28); yet some measure of reference to the life of Marlowe appears inevitable. As White asserts, "All discussions of Marlowe's writings, at one point or another, lead back to the author himself" (White, 2004, p. 85). It is Marlowe's life which perpetually enkindles us to consider his *Doctor Faustus* in the light of his personal life. Marlowe's preoccupation with politics is not unknown. Hammill contends that "Christopher Marlowe is a serious political thinker" and that his profound conversance with political thought "is reflected throughout his works, from the plots he chooses to the words he uses" (2008, p. 291). Marlowe's notorious involvement in clandestine politics distinguishes him from other playwrights like Shakespeare. He executed espionage missions for Queen Elizabeth's secretary, Sir Francis Walsingham, "who sat at the heart of the machine of the Elizabethan state" (Alford, 2012, p. 53); the playwright had connections to influential personalities, e.g. Earl of Northumberland and Ferdinando Stanley, 5th Earl of Derby; and his suspicious death is speculated to be an expedient assassination rather than a guileless bar brawl (Dutton, 2000, p. 66). That a playwright with such a volatile background of involvement in Machiavellian politics writes a play with medieval morality is the crux which necessitates critical attention. Marlowe lived in an era when censorship was officially imposed on the content of all plays and publications. In general, explicit reference to living individuals was strictly

prohibited by the Master of the Revels, the official authority for censorship (Gurr, 2009, p. 5). In such an ambience “an open declaration of dissent was impossible for Marlowe or any other contemporary playwright who valued his freedom to write or even to live” (Cox, 1993, p. 47).

Marlowe’s plays, more than those by any other Elizabethan playwright, are permeated by his vicissitudinous life. Marlovian scholarship, despite the question of collaboration and the postmodern insistence on the death of author, requires us to take heed of Marlowe’s life “as a means of drawing some general conclusions about what his plays and poems collectively communicate to contemporary audiences” (White, 2004, p. 85). Marlowe’s nonconformity or his atheistic notoriety is not merely suspected by such people like Walsingham. His death was the ultimate point of a political trajectory which has to be briefly surveyed. As a spy, his principal mission was ostensibly concerned with the Catholic adversaries of the British monarchy. Yet he was simultaneously accused of atheism. On this ground, Thomas Kyd, the author of *The Spanish Tragedy*, was incarcerated and “tortured (so badly that he never recovered), presumably because the authorities wanted him to implicate Marlowe” (Wootton, 2005, pp. viii-x). Marlowe was long suspected of, at least, two crimes: atheism and acting as a double agent for the Catholics in exile who were colluding against Queen Elizabeth. A few days before his death, “a detailed accusation against Marlowe” was submitted to the Privy Council and Queen Elizabeth was informed of his allegations. On the day of his death, he was engaged in drinking with Robert Poley, a government agent and two felonious companions, including Ingram Frizer. Within hours, he met his tragic end in an apparent brawl with Frizer who was soon released with no murder charges. It is highly conjectured that Marlowe was “assassinated on the Queen’s orders” (Wootton, 2005, pp. x-xi). Marlowe was a notorious figure, not only because of his atheism but with respect to his outspokenness, his defiance of state authority, and his defense of the freedom of speech (Honan, 2005, p. 263). More than being an atheist or a double agent, it is his aspiration for self-determination which requires our attention, for it is Marlowe’s “daring search for freedom” that eventually “attracted the strong hand of government” (Cheney, 2004, p. 16).

Such observations, I am convinced, have to be accommodated in our approach to explore the politics of self-destruction in *Doctor Faustus*, first and foremost, vis-à-vis its primary source text “*The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus*, often referred to as the *English Faust Book* or EFB” (Bevington

& Rasmussen, 1993, p. 3). Marlowe’s version of the Faust myth is substantially indebted to the *Damnable Life* which was itself the English rendition of 1587 German *Historia von D. Johann Fausten* (p. 4). Riddled with adventures, escapades, and lamentations, EFB portrays the fall of ambitious Faustus into “the labyrinth of miseries” (*English Faust Book*, 2005, p. 86); the narrator recurrently attempts to remind his readers that leading an epicurean life will incur “perpetual pains” (p. 87). The central message is recapitulated in the last few lines of the play: “that we go not astray, but take God always before our eyes, to call alone upon Him, and to honor Him all the days of our life” (p. 151). Besides numerous congruities between EFB and *Doctor Faustus*, there are conspicuous moments which, according to Wootton (2005, p. xix), attest to Marlowe’s awareness of Reginald Scot’s *The Discovery of Witchcraft*. The book, published in 1584, was a treatise in refutation of witchcraft on the grounds that the witches’ claimed power of invoking the devil is baseless and what is attributed to witches is merely the effect of illusion. The pact with the devil, Scot argued, was philosophically impossible and the witches’ magical performances were mere legerdemain. The corollary of Scot’s arguments was that to accuse people of witchcraft was grounded on an erroneous assumption. Throughout *Doctor Faustus*, the manifestations of sleights of hand are not few. Wrathful of losing forty dollars for a horse which vanishes in the water, the horse-courser decides to take vengeance on the doctor. During the struggle, he pulls off Faustus’s prosthesis leg, lamenting “Alas, I am undone!” (4.1.175). Being outwitted, for the second time, by Faustus’s trickery and tremendously terrified that he has committed a mortal crime, the horse-courser entreats forgiveness in return for some forfeiture: “O Lord, sir, let me go, and I’ll give you forty dollars more” (4.1.180). On a different occasion, Rafe and Robin, pass a stolen goblet between themselves to dupe the vintner. What casts derision on the solemnity of Faustus’s pact with the devil is that august Mephistopheles can be invoked by Robin’s farcical conjuration:

“*Sanctobulorum Periphrasticon!*—nay, I’ll tickle you, Vintner. Look to the goblet, Rafe. *Polypragmos Belseborams framanto pacostiphos tostu Mephistopheles!* etc. (3.2.26-28)

Through such “bastardized Latin” (Hammill, 1996, p. 310), and in a considerable measure, by the employment of carnivalesque performances of magic (Clark, 1980, p. 103), Marlowe underscores the credibility of Scot’s claim that “it is impossible to distinguish reality from illusion when it comes to magic” (Wootton, 2005, p. xx). Marlowe’s demonstration of devil as illusion is anti-

religious, for not only does it subvert the religious beliefs in devils and their influence, but it implicitly casts suspicion on the possibility of miracle in religion.

Subversion in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* is not confined to the domain of religious beliefs; and an underlying political resistance can be discerned in Faustus's socio-political agenda for reform. One should not, however, expect to identify an overt destabilization of authority; as it has been reiterated, Marlowe, in his play, "adopts an ironic strategy to camouflage" Faustus's confrontation with the "absolutist rule" and the "state authority" (Minshull, 1990, p. 194). The somber beginning of *Doctor Faustus*, distinguished by Faustus's jaundiced construal of the Scriptures and his perfunctory criticism of ancient philosophy and medicine (Bevington et al. 2002, p. 246), is ensued by his review of an array of ambitious reforms with the help of spirits:

I'll have them wall all Germany with brass,  
And make swift Rhine circle fair Wittenberg,  
I'll have them fill the public schools with silk,  
Wherewith the students shall be bravely clad,  
I'll levy soldiers with the coin they bring,  
And chase the Prince of Parma from our land,  
And reign sole king of all our provinces;  
(1.1.90-96)

Undoubtedly there are significant variations between A-Text (1604) and B-Text (1616) of *Doctor Faustus*—a textual question which has received extensive critical attention. Despite such textual differences, the aforementioned lines exist in both texts with the slight difference that the line "And reign sole king of all our provinces" in A-Text appears as "And reign sole king of all the provinces" in B-Text. What is, in my perspective, worth emphasis is that such initiatives for the development of Faustus's immediate socio-political world are almost scarce in EFB, the most plausible source of *Doctor Faustus*. EFB does not depict any motivation for social justice or transparency in the administration of affairs. The ultimate desire of the German magician is "to fly over the whole world and to know the secrets of heaven and earth" (*English Faust Book*, 2005, p. 69). Besides treating his patients by prescribing herbs and drinks and enemas, something which he does prior to his meeting with Mephistopheles, almost all the other achievements of Johann Faustus are insignificant. For instance, he helps a young lover to win the love of a girl who loathes him (p. 139); or he helps three young gentleman attend a nuptial gala and then releases one of them from prison (pp. 122-

4); or he provides an unprecedented sexual gratification for some of the concubines of the Ottoman king (p. 114). Such trivial accomplishments or even feats of eroticism which constitute the bulk of EFB are diminished to a minimal degree in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. In one of his voyages throughout the globe, German Faustus is acquainted with a ruthless tradition which, in the context of EFB, is proffered as a divine punitive measure for the incorrigible children of the town. The pivot of this corrective tradition is a gigantic brass statue of a virgin. The child who is found guilty of committing a shameful offence has to meet a violent death. Upon his kissing the virgin, the statue grips its fatal embrace around the guilty child "with such violence that she crusheth out the breath of the person, breaketh his bulk, and so dieth" (*English Faust Book*, 2005, p. 111).

The fatal crushing of the guilty child does not terminate the execution ritual. The victim is next thrown into a mill where his corpse is shattered into "small morsels which the water carrieth away, so that not any part of him is found again" (*English Faust Book*, 2005, p. 111). This heinous ritual is held in a city which appears to Faustus a "paradise" with excellent streets and "sumptuous" buildings (p. 111). In Marlowe's play, Faustus's thirst for the "gold of India" and the "orient pearl" is not thoroughly the result of his egoistic greed for wealth. His earnest hope to possess gold is ensued by his social aspiration to "fill the public schools with silk / Wherewith the students shall bravely clad" (1.1.92-93). Considering that the sumptuary codes during the Elizabethan England were strict and accordingly, the choice of wearing "silk" was exclusive to the nobility (Bevington et al. 2002, p. 268), Marlowe's aspiration gains a political significance which I explore in the following section.

### III. SOCIOPOLITICAL REFORM

Sumptuary laws were punitive measures imposed by the guardians of social hierarchy; the targets of these laws were the individuals, families, social groups who aspired to surpass the confines of their social rank and standing (Lemire & Riello, 2008, p. 890). Directives regarding dress codes were strictly guarded by two groups of people: the ecclesiastics and the aristocracy. The violation of sumptuary rules was theologically and politically disapproved. Excess in apparel was an offense against God and the sovereign. The excessive concern regarding sartorial finery pertained to its capacity to demarcate the gender, class, and political borders. As such, sumptuary proclamations were made to "set forth what kinds of textiles, ornaments, furs, and even colors of clothing could



be worn by men and women of various ranks” (Howard, 1994, pp. 32-33).

It is obvious that Marlowe’s subversion of sumptuary laws does not merely aim at political authority; it sometimes tends to demonstrate the true face of ecclesiastical hypocrisy. Faustus enjoins the ghastly Mephistopheles to “Go, and return” in the attire of “an old Franciscan friar,” for “That holy shape becomes a devil best” (1.3.26-27). Faustus’s demand arguably violates the semiotic codes which were established for dramaturgic representation of devil on the stage. It subverts the conventional attitude toward appearance; it insinuates that a devil can appear in the garments of a holy ecclesiastic (Maguire & Thostrop, 2013, p. 42). The transgression of codes governing finery was the rejection of socio-political order according to which one’s identity was destined by an immutable universe (Howard, 1994, p. 98). Silk, in general, was “associated with secular or spiritual hierarchies for centuries” (Lemire & Riello, 2008, p. 890), and, as such, Faustus’s aspiration to provide splendid clothes and silk attire for university students was an ostensible defiance of “university dress codes” in early modern England (Bevington & Rasmussen, 1993, p. 116).

The power, in early modern Europe, was believed to be founded on the basis of a divine paradigm the inversion of which was construed as not only anti-religious but a politically subversive act (Clark, 1980, p. 111). The theatrical exhibition of a topsy-turvy world, for instance, through witchcraft, via the violation of sumptuary laws, by travesty of biblical narrations, or, by some form of resistance to the patriarchy, was a double-edged undertaking. It functioned, on the one hand, to entrench the idea that the violation of divine order eventually incurs divine wrath. On the other hand, such an undertaking generated a platform for undermining the existing structure of power and as a result they were not normally tolerated by the political or civil authority (Clark, 1980, pp. 100-103). The desire to destabilize the hierarchical order is a self-destructive measure which needs to be elucidated in the context of a suicidal act in Marlowe’s play.

In western societies, there is a widespread tendency to pathologize suicide; to consider it not only unethical but in violation of inherent desires to protect one’s life against life-threatening events. Associated with mental disease, suicide is conceived banal and even the so-called disputes regarding the individual’s right to die is often approached in the context of clinical discourse when the possibility of an acceptable biological life has diminished to an unbearable minimum. The upshot of such attitudes in the west is that “healthy people would not choose to take their own lives, unless they were not healthy” (Morrissey, 2006, ISSN: 2456-7620

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p. 1). Although the term ‘suicide’ did not exist in Tudor England, yet the very action of self-murder or self-destruction was considered a heinous crime and subjected the perpetrator to posthumous punishment, including the confiscation of the suicide’s chattels. The suicides, legally declared felons de se, were deprived of the typical funereal rites for the Christians. The bodies were also desecrated; they were buried ignominiously in unhallowed areas, for instance, at a crossroads. In the grave, the face of the suicide’s body was laid down and a wooden stake was thrust through the corpse. The suicide’s mental health was crucial in pronouncing a judgment by the coroner; and self-destruction, unless committed by a lunatic or a mentally retarded person, was believed to be diabolical (MacDonald, 1986, pp. 53-55).

Despite adverse criticism of Émile Durkheim’s groundbreaking study of suicide (Healy, 2006, pp. 904-6), a brief reference to his conception of suicide contributes to my discussion of political self-destruction in *Doctor Faustus*. Durkheim conceives of suicide as an intrinsically social phenomenon and identifies it as egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic. Whereas egoistic suicide emerges from inordinate individualism when the social and moral bonds that regulate and give meaning to the life of an individual are broken, (Durkheim, 1952, p. 168), altruistic suicide emanates from insufficient individualism or, in other words, from strong bonds with society when an individual is deeply influenced by the dominant social and cultural norms which regulate individual behavior (pp. 175-176). Anomic suicide is the consequence of social chaos “when society is disturbed by some painful crisis or by beneficent but abrupt transitions” (p. 213); to put it concisely, the absence of, or, distortion in social influence and authority eventuates in the rise of anomic suicide. What is noteworthy is that just as egoistic and altruistic modes are opposite pairs, anomic suicide has its opposite which can be termed fatalistic, resulting from ruthless suppression of human hopes and passion (p. 239).

As under “normal conditions the collective order is regarded as just by the great majority of persons” (Durkheim, 1952, p. 212), one may construe Faustus’s fateful aspiration as anomy, resulting from his painful loss of faith in social justice and order. Yet such a reading of his suicide has a fundamental deficiency. Agamben mentions that Durkheim underlines a significant correlation between the rise of anomy and the deterioration of the political or social institutions which regulate human behavior within societies. “This was tantamount to postulating (as he does without providing any explanation) a need of human beings to be regulated in their activities and passions” (2005, p. 67). As such, Agamben conceives

of psychological approaches that tend to overlook the theologico-political facets of anomic suicide and instead consider such events as anti-social, non-rational, or merely anti-cultural behavior as “uncritical psychologistic” reductionism (p. 66).

Faustus’s self-destructive pact with the devil can be construed differently in the light of politico-theological conceptions in early modern Europe. In his seminal work, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*, medievalist Kantorowicz explains that a suicidal act was, from a humanistic perspective, a violation of the law of self-preservation; but there was concealed, in the very act of self-annihilation, an intrinsic religio-political transgression which was highlighted by the jurists of the late Middle Ages. The court was invariably concerned with the repercussions of suicide; not only was it denounced as an offense against God, but it was a political crime directed against the king. King, in the mindset of medieval jurists, was the embodiment of the Christian society; in this capacity, the king possessed two bodies; a natural body which, like that of any other human being, was subject to disease and deterioration; and an immortal, invisible, and incorruptible body, which, in the politico-theological theory of the day, was conceived of as *corpus mysticum* or the mystic body. The subjects were incorporated in this metaphysical body and were considered as such the mystic members of *corpus mysticum*. Essentially, no conspicuous distinction was made between the mystic body and the body politic in the politico-theological discussions of the time. The conceptualization of the king as both body politic and mystic body is crucial, for it was inherently founded on the conferment of the status of Christ upon the head of state. In the other words, in the same way that Christ was the head of *corpus mysticum*, i.e. the totality of Christian society, the king was considered, by European jurists, as the head of mystic body (Kantorowicz, 1997, pp. 15-16).

Honan mentions that to be a self-pronounced atheist was impossible in Elizabethan era; yet there are accounts which argue that Marlowe, in his private conversations, was a “filthier” and “more outrageous” critic of religion, disputing several biblical events and notions, including the Holy Ghost, the Mosaic miracles, and the exodus of the Jews (2005, p. 245). Hence, prior to my further explication on the possibility of a political suicide in *Doctor Faustus*, I recapitulate a central question of this essay: Why does a playwright whose views gravitate toward atheism and whose death can be construed more as an assassination rather than a coincidental murder write a play which is concerned with supernatural elements, demons, and damnation? Hoelzel juxtaposes the nature of Faustus’s

pact with the devil with the story of Adam and Eve’s fall in Genesis. He argues that, “in order to satisfy his intellectual curiosity he strikes a bargain with the devil whereby he sacrifices not just his earthly life, after a limited period of time, but the eternal life of the hereafter. Like his Ur-ancestors, Faustus barter for knowledge, using life itself as the coin of exchange” (1985, p. 323). In other words, Faustus’s suicide is sacrificial with the intimation that his aspiration for social reform, as I explored above with regard to sumptuary laws, is marginalized if not entirely overlooked. In regard to *Doctor Faustus*, there have been attempts to conceive of Faustus as a victim of individualistic ambitions; such readings commonly tend to undermine readings which conceive of Marlowe’s death as a “sacrifice” in a universe which is hostile to human’s quest for power (Ornstein, 1968, p. 1381).

It has to be admitted that there is no consensus on the notion of sacrifice. The idea of sacrifice provokes the people who tend to conceive of the practice as a euphemistic mask for the concealment of injustice, brutality, and victimization. In western societies, it has become almost impossible to defend it, even as a vital strategy for victory during war. Its spiritual message and objectives are commonly considered baseless. The immensity of emphasis on individualism has rendered it increasingly difficult to defend or justify the denial or the curtailment of our egoism for the interest of others. Sacrifice is readily equaled with other forms of crime as homicide; it is indiscriminate violence. Yet against adverse propaganda and the bulk of anthropological literature which conceive of sacrifice as a morbid rite, as an outmoded illusion, and as a macabre practice, sacrifice has traditionally permeated our quotidian life. As an indispensable aspect of our humane existence, sacrifice needs to be explored rather than denounced in the name of scientific objectivity (Strenksi, 2003, pp. 1-7).

What is at stake here is that in Marlowe’s play, the heinous crime against children, which is recounted as a matter of course in EFB, morphs into a humanistic initiative to improve the lives of students in England; further, the aspiration is not only socio-economic but highly political, for it aims to subvert the political narrative of subjectivity by promoting the status of students to that of nobilities. The ambition for the economic and social improvement of young commoners is immediately mentioned after Faustus is warned by the Good Angel about “blasphemy” (1.1.75) and “God’s heavy wrath” (1.1.74). Despite such fateful caveats, Faustus obstinately wishes to review his social, economic, and political initiatives. He wishes, by jeopardizing his eternal bliss, to

have access to “the secrets of all foreign kings,” to construct a wall made of “brass” around Germany (1.1.89-90) so as to defend the country against foreign invasions. He wishes to “levy soldiers with the coin they bring” and to “chase the Prince of Parma from our land” (1.1.94-95). These measures are explicitly political; yet the aspiration to recruit soldiers with the money the spirits provide for Faustus requires scrutiny as presented in the next section with regard to the life and status of soldiers in early modern Europe.

#### IV. MILITARY REFORM

Soldiers have received praise in almost all societies; they are associated, in the minds of people, with fortitude, honesty, and determination. They have been a source of honor, specifically for those nations which have experienced the urgency of having a well-organized courageous army against enemies. Historically, England is among nations where admiration for soldiers has proved perpetual. During the Elizabethan period, to be a soldier was an honorable status. Sir Philip Sidney, for instance, often identified himself as a courtier, soldier, and poet (Rapple, 2009, pp. 1-2). Courtier-soldiers were an influential socio-political class in Elizabethan England and sometimes they were in conflict with the administration. A significant case in point is the aggravation of rift between the administrators under Sir Robert Cecil and the courtier-soldiers who were led by Lord Essex throughout 1590s (Bucholz & Key, 2009, p. 154). What is remarkable is the relation between the court and soldiers; and yet the tales of courage and honesty represent only one side of the coin. Against the grand and partially eulogistic narrative of soldiery in the Elizabethan period, one can notice signs of injustice. Among prominent courtier-soldiers during Elizabethan Ireland was Sir Richard Bingham, a man in correspondence with the chief of espionage community and appointed as the governor of the Irish province of Connacht from 1584 to 1596. He “had a particularly black reputation in Irish nationalist historiography, serving almost as an identikit for the ‘typical’ rapacious, bloodthirsty dog of war” (Rapple, 2009, p. 251).

There is no doubt that the British monarchy needed weathered military men to establish or to extend its rule, but the case of Sir Richard Bingham sheds light on the scope of injustice during Marlowe’s period. In Ireland, Sir Richard was an instrument of “suppression” and there were complaints about his “arbitrary violence” and his “own dispatches leave no doubt as to his ruthlessness,” for he himself reported that he massacred, during one of his expeditions, all children and women (Connolly, 2007, p.

222). Contrary to the privileged position of the courtier-soldier was that of footmen soldiers who, in early modern Europe, were enlisted either voluntarily or involuntarily. “Involuntary recruitment could range from being pressed into the army by force and physical violence, being lured into the army with deception, or being convicted to serve by a criminal court” (Kamp, 2016, p. 52). In early modern Europe, the payment was not on a just basis and deception was involved in both voluntary and involuntary modes of enlistment. A variety of measures for deception were deployed to demonstrate that recruitment was done willingly. Sometimes recruitment was imposed when young men were under the effect of alcohol and sometimes they were entrapped by recruiters after receiving bribe or bounty from them. Some form of deception was almost indispensable. For instance, the recruiters would offer their targets “free meals or drinks, or even secretly slip money into their pockets. Recruiters then used this as a proof that the men had accepted the bounty and therefore enlisted ‘voluntarily’”. The presence of witnesses (who were often accomplices) enforced this argument” (Kamp, 2016, p. 54).

It is also worth mentioning that a literature of complaint about military life also emerged in 1570s under Queen Elizabeth. This literature was often produced by people who had soldiering experience. In 1574 Barnaby Rich from Essex contributed to this literature by the publication of his book *A Right Excellent and Pleasant Dialogue between Mercury and an English Soldier*. The book has an ambiguous tone, riddled with allusive and allegorical statements, evoking the dreamlike world of William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. The English soldier represents the ideas of the author and Mercury is an apologist who attempts to falsify adverse criticism or at least dilute its pungency. There are references, in Rich’s book, to the imposition of “oppressive taxes” on people and the “failings of recruitment” (Rapple, 2009, pp. 63-5). In comparison with Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, Barnaby’s book can be interpreted as another semblance of the “stalking horse” in the Elizabethan period—a book which, like Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, does not allow the Elizabethan censor to readily identify it as seditious. Prior to any assertion to substantiate the nexus between Faustus’s political aspirations for the recruitment of soldiers and his suicidal or even sacrificial pact, I need to develop my discussions on sacrifice and suicide.

Hubert and Mauss argue that any act of self-sacrifice involves abnegation; however, this act does not involve a total surrender of oneself. Sacrifice has the nature of a contract; it is a barter between gods and man. Thus there is a mingling of selfishness and disinterestedness.

“Fundamentally there is perhaps no sacrifice that has not some contractual element. The two parties present exchange their services and each gets his due” (1964, p. 100). What has been emphasized by several scholars is that Faustus achieves nothing significant in return for damnation. Magnificence of ambitions, in *Doctor Faustus*, suffers “a deflating triviality: Faustus cannot define his desires and only receives trifling, sham rewards for bartering his soul” (Honan, p. 153). Contradictory observations can also be detected in Bevington et al. (2002) who underscore, on the one hand, Marlowe’s radicalization in Cambridge University, his “towering reputation for blasphemy”, and his insinuation at homoeroticism between Jesus and John the Evangelist, to name a few (p. 245); on the other hand, Marlowe’s achievement in *Doctor Faustus* amounts to banality, for readers and spectators realize that Faustus’s grandiloquent aspirations culminate in no more than “frivolities” (p. 246). Minshull who highlights the political nature of resistance against “an absolutist system” in the play (1990, p. 202), ironically claims that Marlowe demonstrates the extent to which “Faustus’s career is one of wasted opportunity” (p. 204), depicting his “buffoonish escapades” (p. 205), and the “ludicrous gap between his boasts and his deeds” (p. 204). In brief, *Doctor Faustus* oscillates between “serious inquiry” and “frivolity” (Bevington & Rasmussen, 2010, p. 196), between “serious action and burlesque parody” (p. 197).

Despite such scholarly insistence on buffoonery, frivolity, and the abortion of any substantial or even meaningful resistance against an autocratic regime, I emphasize that our reconceptualization of death in the play can provide us with the nature of political death for the hope of socio-political change. The nature of self-destruction in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* appears, initially, to be a hybrid form, having the residues of both sacrifice and suicide. Whereas Strenski (2010) conceives of the phenomenon of political self-destruction as acts of gift-giving or sacrifice which emanate from religious convictions with proclivity for suicidal attempts (pp. 157-159), Asad (2007) opts for the concept of sovereignty and the state of exception in his approach toward suicide as a political act. He asserts that the history of suicidal operations in the past few decades support the idea that individuals who are mostly governed by a dysfunctional, often corrupt or illegitimate, state find themselves irrelevant. In such circumstances, they conceive of their self-destruction or act of suicide as a reaction to injustice, even though their violent act may be construed as transgression against law or accepted norms. In fact, it is “the possibility of acting politically” which “makes men

individual and therefore human. It is also what offers them a secular form of immortality” (pp. 46-47).

Compared with Faustus in EFB who commits a sinister homicide by disrupting the performance of a few jugglers whom he finds invidious (*English Faust Book*, 2005, p. 135-6), Marlowe’s Faustus is not only humane but almost innocent. There are strong social bonds between Faustus and his community. Faustus is respected by his magician friends, Valdes and Cornelius. His servant, Wagner, is worried about his salvation; and he is invited to the houses of kings and monarchs. On the night of his death, he is anxious about the safety of his friends, “Talk not of me, but save yourselves and depart” (5.2.52). Being aware of his hideous death, he entreats his friends to pray for him, but do not rescue him: “Ay, pray for me, pray for me! And what noise soever ye hear, come not unto me” (5.2.58-59). The last scene of *Doctor Faustus* testifies to the protagonist’s benignity toward the community of his friends and colleagues. He arouses our commiseration for “the vast disparity between the puerility of his sins and the enormity of his punishment” (Deats, 2015, p. 86).

To probe the political significance of death in *Doctor Faustus*, we have to look beyond the discourse of damnation, denominations, and the consequences of a fictitious, if not superannuated, belief in pact with the devil. What needs to receive adequate attention is that Faustus’s death is self-incurred; but his aspirations are social as well as political. Asad’s (2007) conception of contemporary suicidal operations is quite crucial, for it affirms the pertinence of Faustus’s self-destruction to the politics of our contemporary world. He argues that the trend of self-annihilation for a political cause is neither sacrificial nor the remnant of primitive religious rites. Its origins cannot be traced to the rise of monotheistic, specifically Abrahamic religions; nor is it the result of mere frustration or hopelessness. It is a modern phenomenon and the consequence of the establishment of modern absolutist colonial states alongside with the formation of a new mode of subjectivity in confrontation with an arbitrary Other (pp. 50-52).

A somewhat congruent remark is made by Hammill (2008) in regard to the political works of Marlowe. He underscores Marlowe’s conversance with the state of emergency and the politico-theological concept of sovereign exception and its inherent suspension of law which the State perpetually attempts to enforce on its subjects. Marlowe’s knowledge of the state of exception was the consequence of his personal experience, specifically in 1580s and 1590s when the British monarchy adopted an array of lenient and at times autocratic measures to address national security during Queen



Elizabeth's reign. Marlowe's stance, as a secret agent and an insider within the government, deepened his perception of the arbitrary nature of the Elizabethan state. This experience encouraged him to probe political absolutism and its proclivity toward militaristic rule in his plays (p. 291). A crucial observation of Foucault (2003) sheds further lights on the nature of relation between sovereignty and the subject and the significance of suicide as political defiance. Sovereignty or the State cannot be grounded on the actual death of the subjects; but on the potential power of the sovereign to deprive people of the transient privilege of life. As such, the ontological foundation of the State or sovereign authority is not founded on the subjugation, bondage, or even massacre of the subjects but on the risk or the fear of death. The juridical power as well as the legitimacy of the State rests on the will to let people live. Yet a historical change is also observable in the relation between politics and life; ironically, the sovereign power is now more founded upon the regularization of death and the sovereign will to allow people die (pp. 95, 247).

Marlowe's awareness of the impact of suicide on the relation between sovereign and the subject emerges in his political works where the subject, in defiance of sovereign authority, inflicts on himself a mortal violence. Prime instances are the suicidal deaths of Bajazeth, the subjugated Emperor of Turkey, and his wife Zabina in *Tamburlaine the Great, Part One*. By their suicidal acts, to put it another way, the two inmates subvert "the ontological ground of Tamburlaine's sovereign force" (Hammill 2008, pp. 302-303). One can observe the instances of the same phenomena under the Tsarist Russia, when suicide emerged as political dissent; as such, it was "an affirmation of self-sovereignty against the claims of both religious and secular authorities" (Morrissey, 2004, p. 270). One can also notice the resurgence of self-annihilation in 1920s as anti-communist protest. From the perspective of the Soviet leadership, suicide signified the "absence of political consciousness," "a degenerate unsteadiness" among masses, and, worst of all, the communist party's "failure to subordinate personal life to the interests of the party" (Morrissey, 2006, p. 350).

The convergence of theology and politics in the political discourse of early modern period provides salient insights into a new mode of relation between the king and his subjects. Whereas, during the late middle ages, the relation between the two and the expected allegiance of the subject to his king was defined on the basis of feudal bond between a vassal and his lord, this relation, in later periods, was interpreted in theological terms. The subjects were serving not merely a feudal king but a holy king with a mystic body; he was representative of divine justice and

peace. To sacrifice one's life for such a king was construed as martyrdom; "self-destruction" or suicide, on the contrary, was conceived of as "treason" (Kantorowicz, 1997, pp. 255-256). As such, "the suicide committed an act of felony not only because he acted against Nature and God, but also (as the Tudor jurists pointed out) against the King" (p. 269). In our contemporary history, too, the same politico-theological relation between state and its citizens has predominance. Hence, the subject's attempt for self-destruction is intrinsically subversive, for "power is evident in control over the human body, with the right to kill or not to kill jealously guarded by the state" (Davies, 2005, p. 152). As such, self-destruction is inherently a political transgression. As a political instrument for resistance, it signifies "the subject's audacity to assume the role of the sovereign in the violent destruction of his or her own body" (Movahedi, 2004, p. 14). There is also a very delicate reference to political self-destruction that can be inferred from the juristic discourse of the early modern period on treason as suicide: the subject that "rises against the prince and the body politic commits suicide" (Kantorowicz, 1997, p. 269).

Faustus's ambition for the recruitment of soldiers with "the coin they bring" is profoundly political and more than an implied act of insurrection. Let us assume that no deception, no sly or dishonest methods were applied in the recruitment of soldiers in Marlowe's time. Yet they had to work under the commandment of such courtier-soldiers as Sir Bingham. The life and practice of Sir Bingham is noteworthy, for during the Irish wars, he supervised the collection of spoils in the most arbitrary fashion, for "He, and he alone, had the job of dividing the spoils" (Rapple, 2009, p. 283). One may argue that Sir Bingham was ruthless to Irish men but an honest captain for the soldiers under his commandment; but he was concurrently notorious for his nepotism as "he established himself and his relatives and allies in position of power throughout the region" (Connolly, 2007, p. 222). Further, "the lord treasurer's 1596 inquiry into the conduct of Sir Richard Bingham, the disgraced former president of Connaught, revealed the continuing ambiguities, if not the clear abuse, in the government's dispensation of justice in the mid-1590s" (Maginn, 2012, p. 203). There is, in brief, evidence which hints at "resistance to recruitment" and demoralization often occasioned by "actual military service" in early modern England (Donagan, 2008, p. 219). Even if we assume that the common soldiers under Sir Bingham did not lead a miserable life, one can cautiously surmise, "given William Cecil's bon mot about soldiers in peace being as useless as chimneys in summer" (Rapple, 2009, p. 65), that the life of a foot soldier was not quite

brilliant. Honan observes that “in showing up hypocrisy, prejudice, and the lies of governments, Marlowe wrote with an eye on the faults of power” (2005, p. 363). Even if we presume that the case of Sir Bingham was an anomaly and not representative of a prevalent practice or systematic injustice in the Elizabethan army, Faustus’s aspiration for giving coins to soldiers reveals—if not Marlowe’s awareness of the underhanded methods in the recruitment of soldiers—his ambition to establish, at least, a fair and transparent mechanism for the employment of men he required to fight foreign enemies.

## V. CONCLUSION

Our conception of death has not been consistent throughout history. To accept death, to manipulate death, to regulate it, or merely to let people die or live under the threat of death are not but only a few facets of the enigma of death. More enigmatic is the phenomenon of self-annihilation, its causes, and its impacts on society and political systems. In regard to the question of self-destruction resulting from a devilish pact in *Doctor Faustus*, I attempted to explore the political significance of Faustus’s ambitions with regard to various, and primarily, politico-theological discourse on suicide. Faustus’s blasphemous criticism of science and divinity may imply a rampant disarray within his social, religious and political universe against which he has to rise. The political undertones of *Doctor Faustus* have more lucidity when the work is compared with its hypothetical source text. The play is, among others, the politicization of egoistic wishes in the *English Faust Book*. Faustus’s pact, which Marlowe might not have believed, represents a desperate even suicidal measure for reform, a reform which had to be concealed under the guise of a moralistic play. Furthermore, the juristic discussions of the early modern period conceive of treason against the prince and the body politic as suicide. This attitude of the early modern jurists sheds further light on the nature of Faustus’s so-called pact with devil; it is not only a transgression against the sovereign; it is inherently a political suicide. In more lucid terms, Faustus commits suicide in the first scene of the play; his political death is almost concurrent with his resurrection. Hence, what is at stake in *Doctor Faustus* is not Faustus’s apparently trifling or frivolous achievements, but his suicidal audacity in articulating his albeit limited set of socio-political reforms within a repressive and exploitative political system.

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