



Blocking Agent in Shakespearean Plays

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the roles of 'Edmund,' 'Malvolio,' and 'Shylock,' as blocking agents in three of Shakespeare's plays: "*King Lear*," "*Twelfth Night*," and "*The Merchant of Venice*." A blocking agent is a character who disrupts the resolution of conflicts and creates obstacles for other characters. Edmund's ambition and manipulative actions in "*King Lear*," lead to familial and political chaos. Malvolio's vanity and desire for social advancement in "*Twelfth Night*" clash with the play's joyful and romantic atmosphere, resulting in his eventual humiliation. In "*The Merchant of Venice*," Shylock's insistence on legal justice, without showing mercy, creates a central conflict, highlighting the tension between justice and compassion. Each of these characters serves not only as an antagonist but also as a vehicle for exploring deeper themes such as ambition, social order, and the complexities of justice. Through their roles, Shakespeare illustrates the conflict between individual desires and societal values, enriching the narrative and deepening the thematic complexity of each play.

Keywords: Blocking Agent; Malvolio; Shylock; Edmund; Shakespeare; Plays; Twelfth Nights; The Merchant of Venice; King Lear.

Methodology

This paper examines 'Edmund,' 'Malvolio,' and 'Shylock,' in "*King Lear*," "*Twelfth Night*," and "*The Merchant of Venice*." I analyse key scenes where they disrupt the plot and create conflict. Their actions and interactions with others show how they serve as blocking agents. The study connects their behavior to themes like ambition, justice, and social order. I use secondary sources to support these interpretations. I also compare the blocking agents in the three plays to highlight their distinct roles in tragedy, comedy, and tragicomedy. This approach shows how Shakespeare adds complexity through these characters.

Introduction

Shakespeare's plays explore the intricate characters, captivating plots, and timeless themes. Among these characters, blocking agents play a crucial role in driving the narrative and exploring profound questions about human nature. This paper

dives into the roles of Edmund in *"King Lear,"* Malvolio in *"Twelfth Night,"* and Shylock in *"The Merchant of Venice"* as blocking agents, examining their motivations, actions, and impact on the other characters and the overall themes of the plays. While there has been extensive research on these characters individually, there is a gap in analysing their collective function as blocking agents within the broader context of Shakespeare's dramatic techniques. This paper aims to fill this gap by providing a comparative analysis of these three characters, highlighting their shared function as obstacles to resolution and their unique contributions to the thematic richness of each play. Through a close examination of their actions, motivations, and the consequences of their interventions, this paper will shed light on the significance of blocking agents in Shakespeare's plays. It will explore how these characters challenge the protagonists, complicate the plot, and contribute to the depth and complexity of the plays' central themes.

1. Introduction

Shakespeare's plays explore the intricate characters, captivating plots, and timeless themes. Among these characters, blocking agents play a crucial role in driving the narrative and exploring profound questions about human nature. This paper delves into the roles of Edmund in *"King Lear,"* Malvolio in *"Twelfth Night,"* and Shylock in *"The Merchant of Venice"* as blocking agents, examining their motivations, actions, and impact on the other characters and the overall themes of the plays. While there has been extensive research on these characters individually, there is a gap in analysing their collective function as blocking agents within the broader context of Shakespeare's dramatic techniques. This paper aims to fill this gap by providing a comparative analysis of these three characters, highlighting their shared function as obstacles to resolution and their unique contributions to the thematic richness of each play. Through a close examination of their actions, motivations, and the consequences of their interventions, this paper will shed light on the significance of blocking agents in Shakespeare's plays. It will explore how these characters challenge the protagonists, complicate the plot, and contribute to the depth and complexity of the plays' central themes.

2. Discussion

2.1 Edmund

In Shakespeare's *"King Lear,"* Edmund plays a crucial role as one of the most manipulative and ambitious characters. As the illegitimate son of the Duke of Gloucester, Edmund's resentment, and fervent desire which drives him to rise above his social status. His ambition pushes him to manipulate those around him to achieve his goals, making him a powerful blocking agent in the play. Through his schemes, Edmund disrupts relationships, ignites conflict, and contributes directly to the play's tragic outcome. His actions not only affect the lives of his family but also plunge the entire kingdom into chaos. Edmund's role as a blocking agent is essential to understanding Shakespeare's exploration of ambition, legitimacy, and the fragility of familial and social bonds.

Edmund's role as a blocking agent becomes clear early in the play when he forges a letter to falsely accuse his legitimate half-brother, Edgar, of plotting against their father, Gloucester. This act sets the stage for the tragic conflict that follows. By turning Gloucester against Edgar, Edmund creates a major rift in the family, resulting in Edgar's flight and Gloucester's eventual downfall. In Act 1, Scene 2, Edmund's manipulations immediately lead to chaos and confusion within the family. McDonald (2022) argues that this deceitful act represents the destructive power of unchecked ambition, as Edmund's desire for power and status drives him to betray his own brother. McDonald emphasizes that this manipulation is a key mechanism that Shakespeare uses to heighten the tension and irony in the play (McDonald, 2022).

Edmund's ambition does not stop with his betrayal of his brother. As the play progresses, he forms alliances with Goneril and Regan, King Lear's power-hungry daughters. By aligning himself with these characters, who are already contributing to the kingdom's downfall, Edmund ensures that his actions will have far-reaching consequences. His willingness to betray his own father and

support Goneril and Regan's schemes reflects his lack of loyalty and the extent of his ambition. White (2021) highlights how Edmund's actions deepen the existing political and personal chaos in the play. According to White, Edmund is not merely a self-serving character; his ambition actively fuels the disorder in the kingdom, blocking any chance for peace or stability (White, 2021). This chaos manifests not only in the crumbling relationships between characters but also in the broader political structure, where power struggles lead to widespread destruction.

One of the most significant aspects of Edmund's role as a blocking agent is how he prevents reconciliation between key characters. His deceptions ensure that misunderstandings persist, and conflicts escalate. For example, by turning Gloucester against Edgar, he ensures that father and son remain estranged for the play. This estrangement is crucial, as it sets the stage for the eventual tragedy that befalls Gloucester. The consequences of Edmund's actions reach their peak in Act 5 when the central characters, including Gloucester and Lear's daughters, die as a direct result of the schemes he has put in place. As Berman (2023) observes, Edmund's final confrontation with Edgar, which leads to his downfall, is the culmination of his role as a blocking agent. Berman argues that this moment illustrates the fragility of social and familial bonds, which have been torn apart by Edmund's personal ambition (Berman, 2023).

Edmund's challenge to traditional notions of legitimacy is another key element of his role as a blocking agent. Edmund, as an illegitimate child, lets his ambition drive him to overcome society's-imposed limitations and rise above, determined to claim what he believes is rightfully his. He repeatedly rejects the idea that legitimacy should determine one's status or worth, and he strives to overturn the social order that places him at a disadvantage. This rebellion against traditional values is a central aspect of his character. Leung (2019) discusses how Edmund's rise to power represents a form of social inversion. By subverting the established order, Edmund challenges the very foundations of the political and familial structures in the play. His actions highlight the instability that arises when personal ambition disrupts societal norms (Leung, 2019).

Moreover, Edmund's rejection of legitimacy ties to the theme of moral decay in the play. His willingness to betray his family and manipulate those around him demonstrates the corrupting influence of unchecked ambition. Patel (2020) argues that Shakespeare uses Edmund's character to explore the complex dynamics of loyalty and betrayal. By exploiting Goneril and Regan, and by betraying both his father and his brother, Edmund creates significant barriers for other characters. Patel suggests that Edmund's actions reflect the destructive power of ambition, which erodes trust and loyalty between individuals (Patel, 2020). This erosion of trust is one of the key factors that prevents resolution in the play and drives the narrative toward its tragic conclusion.

One of the most striking aspects of Edmund's role as a blocking agent is his ability to manipulate multiple characters simultaneously. He deceives Gloucester, Edgar, Goneril, Regan, and even King Lear, playing each character against the others to further his own ambitions. This manipulation creates a complex web of deceit that further complicates the plot. The conflicts between characters grow more entangled, making it increasingly difficult for any resolution to take place. Edmund's ability to manipulate so many characters at once is a testament to his cunning and ambition, as he expertly navigates the political and familial tensions in the play.

Edmund's manipulations cause the deaths of Gloucester, Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia. He confronts Edgar in a decisive battle, reaching the height of his role as a blocking agent, and although Edgar kills him, the damage remains. His schemes ruin the kingdom, leaving key characters dead and emphasizing Shakespeare's exploration of power, legitimacy, and fragile social bonds, as Berman (2023) observes.

In conclusion, Edmund's role as a blocking agent in *King Lear* is central to the play's development. Through his manipulations, ambitions, and betrayals, Edmund creates significant obstacles that prevent resolution and contribute to the tragic outcome of the play. His actions disrupt not only his family but also the political structure of the kingdom, highlighting Shakespeare's exploration of themes such as ambition, legitimacy, and moral corruption. Edmund's role is crucial in demonstrating the destructive nature of power and the impact of unchecked personal ambition on social and familial relationships. As a result, he stands as one of the most complex and pivotal

antagonists in the play, driving the narrative toward its inevitable tragic conclusion.

2.2 Malvolio

In "*Twelfth Night*," Shakespeare presents Malvolio as a key figure whose actions disrupt the plot and block other characters from achieving their desires. As Olivia's steward, Malvolio carries an air of self-importance and rigid authority, which places him at odds with the light-hearted and festive tone that dominates the play. His strict nature and inflated sense of self-worth make him a significant "blocking agent" who prevents other characters from freely pursuing their relationships and happiness. Throughout the play, Malvolio's ambition, vanity, and misguided sense of superiority drive much of the conflict, leading to his eventual downfall and humiliation.

From the start, Malvolio's sternness and moral rigidity define his character. He frequently criticizes others, especially Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek, for their drinking, singing, and disorderly behavior. Disapproving of their rowdiness, Malvolio repeatedly asserts his authority by scolding them. In Act 2, Scene 3, he reprimands them for their late-night revelry, accusing them of madness and calling their actions unseemly. His constant efforts to impose order and his disdain for the more carefree characters isolate him in the world of Illyria. Hayward (2020) argues that Malvolio's rigid personality sharply contrasts with the play's themes of love, joy, and freedom, making him a figure who tries to block the natural flow of events and relationships.

Malvolio's ambition is one of the primary ways he functions as a blocking agent. His desire to rise above his social station becomes evident when he falls for the prank orchestrated by Maria, Sir Toby, and Feste. They plant a letter, from Olivia, which suggests she is in love with Malvolio and desires to marry him. Malvolio, already full of self-love, quickly believes the letter and begins acting in absurd ways to win Olivia's favour. He dresses in yellow stockings, smiles constantly, and behaves with exaggerated confidence, all to align himself with what he believes to be Olivia's desires. Malvolio's ambition blinds him to the reality of his situation, as he fails to see that Olivia has no romantic interest in him. Instead, he becomes the object of ridicule and scorn, particularly from the other members of Olivia's household.

Malvolio's ambition leads him to believe that he can change his social status through marriage to Olivia. He envisions himself as a wealthy and powerful noble person, imagining a future where he holds authority over Sir Toby and others. This fantasy, however, only highlights Malvolio's delusion. Olivia never expresses any interest in him, and his misguided attempts to win her over push him further away from her. Kells (2021) notes that Malvolio's desire for social advancement becomes a form of self-sabotage, as his foolish behavior alienates him from Olivia and the other characters, further isolating him from the play's joyful and communal atmosphere (Kells, 2021). In this way, Malvolio's ambition not only blocks his own happiness but also creates obstacles for others by diverting attention from the true romantic pairings in the play.

In addition to his ambition, Malvolio's vanity plays a key role in his function as a blocking agent. He sees himself as superior to others, particularly those of lower social standing, and believes that he deserves greater respect and admiration. This sense of superiority is evident in his interactions with characters like Maria, whom he treats with condescension and disdain. His vanity blinds him to the feelings and perspectives of others, causing him to act in ways that disrupt the social harmony of Olivia's household. For instance, when Malvolio begins to believe that Olivia loves him, he adopts an even more arrogant and self-important attitude, further alienating himself from the people around him. This vanity leads to his downfall, as it makes him an easy target for the prank played on him by Sir Toby, Maria, and Feste.

Malvolio does not limit his role as a blocking agent to his ambition and vanity. He actively imposes order and control over Olivia's household, creating obstacles for the other characters. He enforces strict rules and discipline, particularly on Sir Toby and Sir Andrew, who embrace a carefree, indulgent lifestyle. Malvolio's persistent efforts to regulate their behavior position him as an antagonist to the play's spirit of celebration and enjoyment. His disapproval of the revelry and chaos around him casts him as a figure of repression, blocking the freedom and fun the other characters embrace. Brown (2023) argues that Malvolio's need to control Olivia's household reflects

a deeper conflict between authority and liberty, with Malvolio representing the forces of order and restriction in contrast to the liberating forces of love and festivity.

Despite Malvolio's strictness and ambition, his downfall is inevitable. After the prank convinces him that Olivia loves him, Malvolio's behavior becomes increasingly erratic and inappropriate. He dresses in ridiculous clothing, speaks to Olivia in a manner that is completely out of character for a servant, and abandons his usual sense of decorum. His foolish actions lead Olivia and others to believe that he has gone mad, resulting in his confinement in a dark room, where Feste has tormented him. This imprisonment symbolizes the collapse of Malvolio's ambitions and his loss of control over the situation. Rather than achieving the power and status he desires, Malvolio finds himself humiliated and powerless.

Malvolio's downfall serves as a form of poetic justice, as his excessive pride and ambition lead to his ultimate humiliation. However, his fate is also marking a sense of bitterness and unresolved conflict. At the end of the play, Malvolio refuses to accept his defeat gracefully. Instead, he vows to seek revenge on those who have wronged him, proclaiming, "I'll be revenged on the whole pack of you!" (Act 5, Scene 1). This final outburst underscores that, while the play resolves its romantic and comedic conflicts, Malvolio's anger and sense of injustice remain unresolved. Wilson (2022) points out that his vow for revenge brings out the darker side of "*Twelfth Night*."

In the end, Malvolio's role as a blocking agent in "*Twelfth Night*" is central to the play's structure and themes. His ambition, vanity, and desire for control create significant obstacles for the other characters, preventing them from freely pursuing their desires and contributing to the overall tension and conflict in the story. By the conclusion of the play, Malvolio's downfall and his vow of revenge serve as reminders of the dangers of unchecked ambition and pride. Shakespeare uses Malvolio's character to explore themes of social mobility, authority, and the consequences of personal ambition, making him a key figure in the play's exploration of the tensions between order and freedom, love, and pride.

2.3 Shylock

In Shakespeare's, "*The Merchant of Venice*," Shylock functions as the central blocking agent, creating significant obstacles that drive the play's dramatic tension. Shylock's unyielding demand for justice in the form of a pound of Antonio's flesh makes him an essential figure in the conflict. His refusal to compromise or accept mercy from the Christian characters pushes the narrative toward its climax. Through Shylock's actions, Shakespeare explores themes of justice, revenge, and cultural division, making him a vital force in the play. Shylock's role as a blocking agent is most evident in his insistence on fulfilling the bond between himself and Antonio. This bond, which requires a pound of Antonio's flesh as collateral for a loan, forms the basis of the play's central conflict. When Antonio is unable to repay the loan, Shylock blocks any attempts to resolve the situation peacefully. His refusal to accept repayment or show mercy creates a legal and moral dilemma that affects all the other characters. This insistence on strict justice, without any leniency, drives the play toward its tense courtroom scene.

Also, as a blocking agent, Shylock prevents the smooth progression of the plot by refusing to negotiate. Bassanio and Portia offer to repay the debt, but Shylock stands firm in his demand for Antonio's flesh. According to Gross (2001), Shylock's refusal to accept monetary compensation is not just a personal vendetta but a broader statement about his place in Venetian society. He seeks revenge for the wrongs he has suffered as a Jew in a Christian society, which adds another layer of complexity to his role as a blocking agent.

Moreover, Shylock's role challenges the other characters, particularly Portia, to find a way around his demands. His insistence on legal justice forces Portia to use her wit and legal knowledge to outmanoeuvre him in court. Without Shylock's obstruction, the play would lack its central tension. Author explores the moral questions surrounding justice and mercy through the character of Shylock. The trial scene, where Shylock demands the pound of flesh, represents the height of his role as a blocking agent. Here, he directly challenges the other characters, blocking any straightforward resolution. Shylock's actions place Antonio's life in danger, and his insistence

on the bond forces Portia, disguised as a lawyer, to intervene. This scene is the climax of the play's conflict, and Shylock's role as the antagonist who will not relent drives the drama.

Furthermore, Portia's famous speech on mercy is a direct response to Shylock's rigid demand for justice. Her plea for compassion—"The quality of mercy is not strained"—stands in stark contrast to Shylock's insistence on the letter of the law. According to Bate (1993), the tension between Shylock and Portia in this scene embodies the play's larger exploration of the conflict between justice and mercy. Shylock, by refusing to show mercy, blocks any chance of an easy or harmonious resolution.

Even when offered financial compensation far greater than the original loan, Shylock remains unmoved. His role as a blocking agent is critical to the play's exploration of the dangers of inflexibility and the consequences of prioritizing revenge over reconciliation. Shylock's presence in the trial scene not only heightens the stakes but also brings out the moral complexity of the play, forcing the characters and the audience to grapple with subjective questions about justice, morality, and human nature.

Shylock's role as a blocking agent goes beyond the financial and legal aspects of the plot. He also serves as a cultural and social barrier within the play. As a Jewish moneylender in a Christian society, Shylock's actions reflect the tension between diverse cultural and religious groups. His demand for justice, rather than mercy, challenges the Christian values of forgiveness and compassion that the other characters, especially Antonio and Portia, uphold.

Shylock's Jewish identity is a key factor in his role as a blocking agent. His refusal to conform to the Christian ideals of mercy and forgiveness positions him as an outsider, and this outsider status reinforces his antagonistic role in the play. According to Cohen (1985), Shylock's role as the cultural other in "The Merchant of Venice" adds depth to his function as a blocking agent. His actions are not just about personal revenge but also about asserting his dignity and identity in a society that marginalizes him. This tension between Shylock and the Christian characters represents a broader social conflict, one that Shylock's actions bring to the surface.

Shylock's insistence on following the strict terms of the bond and his refusal to engage in the Christian practice of mercy block not only the resolution of the financial conflict but also the cultural reconciliation. His role as a blocking agent is, therefore, not just about the pound of flesh but about the larger divisions between Jews and Christians in Venetian society.

Shylock's function as a blocking agent raises important questions about justice, mercy, and revenge. By standing firm in his demand for the pound of flesh, Shylock challenges the other characters to reconsider their own values. His role forces Portia, Antonio, and Bassanio to grapple with the ethical implications of justice and mercy. The moral questions that arise in the play stem directly from Shylock's blocking actions.

Furthermore, Shylock's role as a blocking agent complicates the audience's understanding of justice. While he is the antagonist who prevents the resolution of the conflict, his motivations are rooted in the injustices he has suffered. Antonio has publicly insulted and mistreated him, and Shylock's demand for justice is, in part, a response to this long-standing abuse. As Katz (2013) argues, Shylock's role as a blocking agent exposes the play's deeper moral ambiguities. He is both a victim and a villain, and his actions force the audience to confront the uncomfortable realities of prejudice and revenge.

Shylock's ultimate defeat in court, where he loses not only the bond but also his religious identity through forced conversion, suggests that the resolution of the play comes at a high ethical cost. His role as a blocking agent brings out the play's darker themes, including the consequences of rigid justice and the dangers of cultural exclusion.

In, "*The Merchant of Venice*," Shylock plays a critical role as the blocking agent, preventing the other characters from easily resolving the central conflict. His demand for the pound of flesh, his refusal to accept mercy, and his status as an outsider all contribute to his function as an obstacle. Shylock's actions force the characters to confront complex moral questions about justice, revenge, and mercy, and his role brings out the play's deeper thematic concerns. By blocking the resolution of the plot, Shylock drives the dramatic tension and ensures that the audience must grapple with the ethical and social issues that Shakespeare explores.

Shylock's presence as a blocking agent is essential to the structure of the play. His actions create the central conflict that the other characters must overcome, and his role highlights the cultural and religious tensions of Venetian society. As Gross (2001), Bate (1993), Cohen (1985), and Katz (2013) each argue, Shylock's role is central to the play's exploration of justice and mercy. Without his blocking actions, *The Merchant of Venice* would not have the same moral complexity or dramatic impact.

3 Conclusion

Analysing 'Edmund,' 'Malvolio,' and "Shylock," as blocking agents reveals their significant contribution to the dramatic structure, thematic depth, and moral complexity of Shakespeare's plays. Their actions not only push the plot forward but also force the other characters and the audience to confront challenging questions about ambition, justice, and human relationships. Edmund, through his manipulations and ambition, highlights the destructive nature of unchecked power and the fragility of social and familial bonds. Malvolio, with his vanity and misguided sense of self-importance, exposes the dangers of excessive pride and the importance of finding balance between order and freedom. Shylock, with his insistence on legal justice and refusal to compromise, challenges the audience to grapple with complex questions about mercy, revenge, and the consequences of prejudice. By examining these characters as blocking agents, we gain a deeper understanding of Shakespeare's ability to create multifaceted characters who drive the narrative and explore profound themes. These characters, through their actions and motivations, contribute to the richness and enduring relevance of Shakespeare's plays, making them timeless classics that continue to resonate with audiences across generations.

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