

Les Fourberies de Scapin (Scapin's Deceits) (Molière, 1671)

Act I

Octave, the son of Argante, and Léandre, the son of Géronte, have taken advantage of their fathers' absence to fall in love. Léandre loves a gypsy called Zerbinette, while Octave has married Hyacinte, a penniless young woman. Now the old men have returned and Argante intends to arrange a marriage between his son Octave and the daughter of his friend Géronte. She is expected to arrive very soon from Tarento. Octave is terrified at the thought of having to break the news of his marriage to his bad-tempered father. Octave's servant, Silvestre, is of little use, but Léandre has a valet, Scapin, who is a genius at plotting and conniving. Scapin agrees to talk to Argante who is not impressed by Scapin's story that Octave was compelled to marry Hyacinte in order to avoid being killed by her family. Argante insists that he will have the marriage annulled anyway.

Act II

In his eagerness to justify Octave's actions, Scapin tells Argante that Léandre has done "even worse". Argante then tells Géronte, who in turn repeats Scapin's story to Léandre, who is so furious that he threatens to kill Scapin if he does not confess his crime. Scapin does indeed confess a series of misdemeanours (drinking his master's wine, for instance) but swears, quite truthfully, that he has not even spoken to Géronte. When Léandre suddenly learns that he must pay a ransom or lose Zerbinette forever, he forgets his rage and turns to Scapin for help. Octave also needs money. Scapin will oblige. Argante consents to give a financial compensation to Hyacinte's brother (Silvestre, disguised as a dangerous swashbuckler) who promises to have the marriage between Octave and his sister annulled. Géronte, a confirmed miser, is somewhat harder to persuade, but when Scapin tells him that Léandre has been kidnapped by Turks and will be sold into slavery, he finally breaks down and pays the ransom.

Act III

Scapin decides to take revenge on Géronte who has discredited him with Léandre. Hyacinte's brother, so says Scapin, is coming to kill Géronte for wanting to put his own daughter in Hyacinte's place. Scapin persuades Géronte to hide in a sack and, pretending to be the famous swashbuckler and his fierce friends, he hits the sack repeatedly. Géronte does discover the subterfuge but, to add insult to injury, Zerbinette, who does not know to whom she is speaking, describes the trick that has been played on him to extort the "ransom". Things would probably go badly for Scapin if Nérine, the nurse, had not arrived at that very moment to reveal that Hyacinte was really Géronte's daughter who had arrived from Tarento earlier than expected. Thanks to a bracelet which Argante recognizes, Zerbinette is discovered to be his long lost daughter! The young men have unwittingly acted according to their fathers' wishes! Now Scapin, mortally wounded by a falling hammer, is carried in to see Argante and Géronte. Of course the old men forgive the dying valet. But that is just his latest trick: now that all has been forgiven, Scapin joins in the celebration feast.