

STATE OF SOUTH CAROLINA)
)
COUNTY OF DORCHESTER)

IN THE COURT OF COMMON PLEAS
FOR THE FIRST JUDICIAL CIRCUIT
CASE NO. 2017-CP-18-987

FILED-RECORDED

Molly M. Morphew,)
)
Plaintiff,)
)
vs.)
)
Stephen Dudek and Doreen Cross,)
)
Defendants,)
)

2-21-2018
Cheryl Graham
Clerk of Court
Dorchester County (RHS)

**ORDER GRANTING DEFENDANTS'
MOTION TO DISMISS**

SC Court of Appeals

MAR 22 2018

RECEIVED

On November 13, 2017, the above-captioned case came before this Court on the Defendants' Motion to Dismiss, pursuant to Rules 12(b)(6) and 12(b)(8), SCRPC. Present at hearing were Samuel M. Wheeler, counsel for the Defendants, and the Plaintiff, Molly M. Morphew, *pro se* ("Plaintiff" or "Morphew"). For the reasons stated below, the Defendants' Motion is GRANTED.

FACTS AND PROCEDURAL HISTORY

Morphew, proceeding *pro se*, filed the above-captioned action against Stephen Dudek and Doreen Cross (collectively, "Dudeks") on or about August 24, 2016, alleging claims for constructive trust, abuse of process and fraud.

The same parties have been and are involved in a ^{DSG.} ~~prolonged~~ ^{labyrinthine} string of litigation. _{DSG}
Specifically, Morphew has two other cases, as well as an appeal, pending against the Dudeks, all of which arise out of (1) Morphew's alleged legal or equitable ownership of real property, located at 788 E. Butternut Road, Summerville, SC 29483 ("Property"); and (2) alleged fraud perpetrated by the Dudeks on the court in other actions pending between the parties. (see, generally, Compl.; *Molly M. Morphew v. Thomas Ferro, et al.*, Case No. 2013-CP-18-00183; *Molly M. Morphew v. Stephen Dudek, et al.*, Case No. 2016-CP-18-1706; Court of Appeals

Appeal No. 2017-001393).

According to Morphew's complaint, in 2012, the Dudeks had a contract to purchase the Property from the previous owners, Thomas and Lorraine Ferro (collectively, "Ferros"). (Compl. ¶ 29(e)). Morphew had a contingency contract on the Property, which she alleges remains valid (Id. at ¶ 19). Morphew claims that the Dudeks contract expired on or about November 30, 2012, at which time Morphew should have been able to purchase the Property. (Id.; and Id at ¶ 29(e)). Morphew goes on to allege that the Dudeks filed a *lis pendens* and specific performance action without a valid contract, and the judge in that action was "fooled" when he awarded the Dudeks specific performance. (Id. at ¶¶ 10, 29). Morphew further asserts that, during the course of discovery and at trial in the previous action, the Dudeks committed fraud on the court regarding their ability to purchase the Property. (see Compl.). Based on the actions of the Dudeks, Morphew alleges that she is the equitable owner of the Property (constructive trust) and that she is entitled to damages for fraud and abuse of process. (Id.).

The case Morphew references is *Stephen Dudek, et al. v. Thomas M. Ferro, et al.*, Case No. 2013-CP-18-00074, which was consolidated with *Molly M. Morphew v. Thomas Ferro, et al.*, Case No. 2013-CP-18-00183. Both Morphew and filed suit seeking specific performance, each alleging that their contract with the previous owners, the Ferros, was valid. On June 11, 2014, and June 12, 2014, the cases were tried in front of the Honorable James E. Chellis, Master-In-Equity for Dorchester County. Following trial but prior to a decision by Judge Chellis, the Ferros filed a "pleading statement" in which they raised instances of alleged fraud by the Dudeks. (see Case No. 2013-CP-18-00183, Pleading Statement, September 10, 2014). On November 6, 2014, Judge Chellis issued an order awarding the Dudeks specific performance. (see Case No. 2013-CP-18-00183, Nov. 6, 2014 Order). Both Morphew and the Ferros appealed that order. (see *Stephen Dudek v. Ferro*, Appellate Case No. 2014-002633). On January 11, 2017, the Court

of Appeals upheld Judge's Chellis' award of specific performance in an unpublished opinion, numbered 2017-UP-019. (Id.). Morphew initially petitioned for a rehearing, but she voluntarily dismissed the petition on February 9, 2017. (Id.). The Court of Appeals granted the dismissal and issued remittitur on February 15, 2017. (Id.). Following remittitur, Judge Chellis issued several orders setting a schedule for the Dudeks to close on the Property and, ultimately, for contempt, as Morphew refused to vacate the Property after closing. (see Case No. 2013-CP-18-00183). Morphew has appealed this contempt order. (see Court of Appeals Appeal No. 2017-001393).

While Morphew's original appeal was pending, she filed her second action against the Dudeks, as well as against virtually every person or entity that had any involvement in the Dudeks sales contract or in the trial in Case No. 2013-CP-18-00183. (see *Molly M. Morphew v. Stephen Dudek, et al.*, Case No.2016-CP-18-1706). In that action, Morphew has pleaded fraud, or some variation thereof, arising out of the alleged facts that form the basis of Morphew's complaint in this action. By way of an order issued on or about January 31, 2017, the Honorable Deadra Jefferson dismissed all of Morphew's fraud-based claims against the Dudeks, leaving only an intentional infliction of emotional distress cause of action. (see January 31, 2017, Order, Case No.2016-CP-18-1706).

In total, Morphew has lost an appeal, she has three actions pending, and she has an appeal pending. All of her past and present actions arise out of her alleged ownership in the Property or out of the fraud that the Dudeks perpetrated on the court in the original action, Case No. 2013-CP-18-00183.

STANDARD OF REVIEW

The ruling on a Rule 12(b)(6), SCRCF motion to dismiss must be based solely upon the allegations set forth in the complaint. *State Bd. of Med. Examiners v. Fenwick Hall, Inc.*, 300

S.C. 274, 387 S.E.2d 458 (1990). The motion will not be sustained if the facts alleged and the inferences reasonably deducible therefrom would entitle the plaintiff to relief on any theory of the case. *Stiles v. Onorato*, 318 S.C. 297, 457 S.E.2d 601 (1995); *Brown v. Leverette*, 291 S.C. 364, 353 S.E.2d 697 (1987). The question to be considered is whether in the light most favorable to the plaintiff, and with every doubt resolved in his behalf, the complaint states any valid claim for relief. *Toussaint v. Ham*, 292 S.C. 415, 357 S.E.2d 8 (1987).

Rule 12(b)(8) states that a complaint should be dismissed when "another action is pending between the same parties for the same claim." Rule 12(b)(8), SCRPC. In *Capital City Ins. Co. v. BP Staff, Inc.*, 382 S.C. 92, 674 S.E.2d 524 (2009), the South Carolina Court of Appeals explained dismissal under this rule as follows:

In South Carolina, dismissal under Rule 12(b)(8) may be proper when there is (1) another action pending, (2) between the same parties, (3) for the same claim. Rule 12(b)(8), SCRPC. The rule has historic ties to a former statute providing a defendant a similar opportunity to demur; our supreme court traditionally interpreted that statute narrowly, stating that it only applied when there was identity of parties, causes of action and relief. *S.C. Public Serv. Comm'n v. City of Rock Hill*, 268 S.C. 405, 408, 234 S.E.2d 228, 229 (1977); see also James F. Flanagan, *South Carolina Civil Procedure* 96-97 (2d ed.1996). We find this approach consistent with modern day practice under rules similar to our Rule 12(b)(8). See, e.g., *Beatty v. Liberty Mut. Ins. Group*, 893 N.E.2d 1079, 1084 (Ind.App.Ct.2008) (applying 12(b)(8) dismissal "where the parties, subject matter, and remedies are precisely the same, and it also applies when they are only substantially the same."). Accordingly, we interpret the rule narrowly such that the claim must be precisely or substantially the same in both proceedings in order for the drastic remedy of dismissal to be appropriate under Rule 12(b)(8).

DISCUSSION

I. Morphew's complaint is dismissed pursuant to Rule 12(b)(6) and the doctrine of *res judicata*.

In order for *res judicata* to operate as a bar to a lawsuit, the following elements need to be proven: (1) identity of the parties; (2) identity of the subject matter; and (3) adjudication of the

issue in the former suit. *Riedman Corp. v. Greenville Steel Structures, Inc.*, 308 S.C. 467, 419 S.E.2d 217 (1992).

"*Res judicata* bars subsequent actions by the same parties when the claims arise out of the same transaction or occurrence that was the subject of a prior action between those parties." *Judy v. Judy*, 393 S.C. 160, 172, 712 S.E.2d 408, 414 (2011). "Under the doctrine of *res judicata*, a litigant is barred from raising any issues which were adjudicated in the former suit and any issues which might have been raised in the former suit." *Id.*

In the original action between these parties, Case No. 2013-CP-18-00183, Morphew could have brought her constructive trust or equitable ownership claim against the Dudeks. After losing at the trial court level, Morphew appealed, and the Court of Appeals affirmed the order awarding the Dudeks specific performance. Not happy with the Court of Appeals decision, Morphew filed her second action, Case No. 2016-CP-18-1706, as well as this action. Morphew has more than had her day in court on the issue of ownership of the Property. Furthermore, Morphew's constructive trust claim is fundamentally flawed, and she cannot plead a set of facts, against the Dudeks, that would entitle her to relief on her constructive trust cause of action. Constructive trust "results from fraud, bad faith, abuse of confidence, or violation of a fiduciary duty which gives rise to an obligation in equity to make restitution." *Carolina Park Associates, LLC v. Marino*, 732 S.E.2d 876, 879 (2012). (quoting, *Lollis v. Lollis*, 291 S.C. 525, 529, 354 S.E.2d 559, 560 (1987)). At all times, the Dudeks had a contract with the previous owners, the Ferros. At no point did the Dudeks have a contract or relationship, fiduciary or otherwise, with Morphew. If anyone could conceivably be entitled to "restitution," it would be the Ferros; however, the issue of ownership has firmly been established by the trial court and Court of Appeals. For these reasons, Morphew's constructive trust claims is dismissed and barred by *res judicata*.

As to Morphew's fraud and abuse of process claims, Morphew had legal mechanisms to bring the alleged fraud and abuse of process to the court's attention. Rule 60, SCRC, addresses the exact situation. Rule 60(b), SCRC, allows for a party to move to set aside an order which was based on fraud or after the discovery of new evidence. Rule 60(b), SCRC. The rule even allows for a party to request leave from the appellate court. The supposed fraud was known to Morphew and the Ferros after trial but before the lower court issued the order awarding the Dudeks specific performance. The Ferros filed a "pleading statement" in September, 2014, months prior to the court awarding specific performance. In this "pleading statement," the Ferros outline all the alleged fraud surrounding the case. Yet, at no point, either after issuance of the order awarding specific performance, or the filing of their first appeal, did Morphew or the Ferros file a motion pursuant to Rule 60, SCRC, seeking to have the order set aside for fraud. (see Case No. 2013-CP-18-00183). Despite knowing of the alleged fraud by the Dudeks, Morphew never filed a Rule 60 motion. Moreover, Morphew brought the same claims in the second case she filed against the Dudeks, Case No. Case No.2016-CP-18-1706. By way of an order issued on January 31, 2017, the court dismissed Morphew's fraud-based claims against the Dudeks. For these reasons, her fraud and abuse of process causes of action are dismissed and barred by *res judicata*.

II. Morphew's complaint is dismissed by Rule 12(b)(8).

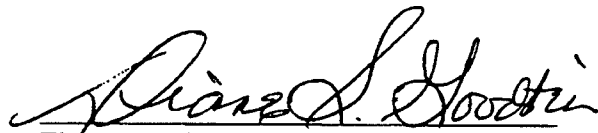
As discussed above, Morphew filed a second case against the Dudeks and almost all persons or entities that had any involvement with the Dudeks' contract with the Ferros, or with the trial in Morphew's original case. Dismissal under Rule 12(b)(8) is appropriate when another action is pending between the same parties for the same or substantially the same claim. Rule 12(b)(8), SCRC; *Capital City Ins. Co. v. BP Staff, Inc.*, 382 S.C. 92, 674 S.E.2d 524 (2009). The second action filed by Morphew, Case No.2016-CP-18-1706, is pending. It is between

Morphew and the Dudeks. And it is for the same or substantially the same claim. For these reasons, Morphew's complaint is dismissed pursuant to Rule 12(b)(8).

CONCLUSION

For all of the above stated reasons, the Defendants' motion to dismiss is GRANTED.

IT IS SO ORDERED.



The Honorable Diane S. Goodstein
First Judicial Circuit

St. George, South Carolina

2-20, 2018