

From Frances Sheridan's *A Trip to Bath* (1765)¹ to Elizabeth Kuti's *The Whisperers* (1999): Questions of Genre, Adaptation Strategies and Authorship

Mária Kurdi

Abstract

The English-Hungarian Elizabeth Kuti's (1969-) comedy, *The Whisperers* (1998) is based on the Anglo-Irish Frances Sheridan's (1724-1766) unfinished third play, *A Trip to Bath* (1765). In fact, the later work is a special adaptation of the earlier one, the result of an intertextual conversation between the two writers, with Kuti completing Sheridan's fragment in the spirit of the original. This essay examines how *A Trip to Bath* fits in with the contemporary comic genre on the stage and the ways and modes in which *The Whisperers* recasts it to produce a unique piece of collaborative theater. Kuti's addition continues and energizes the reflection of the social and emotional variedness in the co-authored work, a feature which characterizes the best of eighteenth-century English comedy. The argument of the essay also concerns itself with issues of dual authorship, adaptation strategies, and both textual and dramaturgical coherence in the newly produced work.

Keywords: Frances Sheridan, eighteenth-century English comedy, Elizabeth Kuti, adaptation, dual authorship

**

In a May 1999 issue of the magazine *Variety*, Karen Ficker's review of the premiere of Elizabeth Kuti's *The Whisperers* (1998) begins as follows: the play "is a delightful conversation across the centuries between two female playwrights, one launching her career by doing loving service to another who was sadly under-appreciated in her own time." The participants of the literary conversation are the Anglo-Irish Frances Sheridan (1724-1766) and the English-Hungarian Elizabeth Kuti (1969-), whose

1 I first heard about Frances Sheridan from the late Professor Christopher Murray of University College Dublin, who gave a lecture on eighteenth-century drama in our department as a visiting scholar back in the 1990s. We published the lecture in the pioneering issue of *Focus: Papers in English Literary and Cultural Studies* in 1998. Sadly, he died of terminal illness at 83 not long ago, while I was working on the draft of this article. Therefore my paper is dedicated to him, an excellent, widely known and highly valued expert of English and Irish theater and also a kind, appreciative and generous colleague, who was always ready to give advice and support emerging scholars.

respective private journeys took them in opposing directions. Frances Sheridan's also Irish-born husband, Thomas Sheridan, a theater manager and playwright, decided to leave Ireland for London, which offered Irish writers better opportunities than colonial Dublin at that time. Having joined her husband, it was in London that Frances Sheridan earned her first and lasting success with the epistolary novel *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), influenced and encouraged by and dedicated to the renowned contemporary giant of English fiction, Samuel Richardson. A couple of years later, Sheridan turned to the stage and the fruits of this new direction were two full length comedies, *The Discovery* (1763) and *The Dupe* (1764), as well as the unfinished *A Trip to Bath* (1765), of which only three acts have survived. However, as Gabriella Hartvig notes, "Sheridan's other works remained advertised through *Sidney Bidulph*. This shows that Sheridan must have remained fairly known in the eighteenth century; but she could never exceed the success of *Sidney Bidulph* with her later works" (60).

Coming from Ireland, yet Sheridan considered London her real home (see Hogan and Beasley 19). Conversely, more than two centuries later, the English-born Kuti spent productive years in Dublin, about which she says: "Ireland gave me so much, so many blessings, in the eleven years I lived there" in the 1990s, enjoying "the chance to become an actor and a playwright in the Irish theatre" ("Strangeness" 142). As an actress she played, for instance, the title role of Dion Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* in 1998 and, besides, was studying eighteenth-century Irish women's drama for her PhD dissertation at Trinity College. During this period she came to know Sheridan's unfinished play, *A Trip to Bath*, which she read with great enthusiasm, and ventured to publish an essay about the playwright's career and the drama itself. In the closing part of this work Kuti says that until quite recently Frances Sheridan had been overshadowed by her son, the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, and adds: "Such female dramatists as Frances Sheridan deserve to be written back into theatrical history and the repertoire—before another of our connections with the past is 'illiterate' from our memories" (128). She herself certainly did write Sheridan back into theatrical history by completing *A Trip to Bath* to achieve a play of five acts renamed *The Whisperers* (1998). Later Kuti felt inspired to conceive her own plays, two of which are set in Ireland: *Treehouses* (2000) and *The Sugar Wife* (2006)—the latter was revived as part of The Gregory Project at the Abbey Theatre in the spring of 2024 to commemorate the foundation of the Abbey in 1904 and the ardent and efficient work for the theater of one of its first directors, Lady Augusta Gregory.

By genre, *A Trip to Bath* qualifies as a comedy. Comedy in the eighteenth century showed many differences from its Restoration antecedent, a historically branded form of the comedy of manners, which was flourishing on the stage in the final decades of the seventeenth century, embracing themes of profane behavior, promiscuity and rejection of Puritan morality in the upper circles of the society. Restoration comedy included stock characters such as the hedonistic libertine or rake, women whose sole interest is to find a husband with a lot of money, older, hypocritical figures, for instance, fathers who want to enforce their patriarchal rights at whatever cost, aging coquettish women, country boors, etc. The unfolding changes of the genre in the new century were due to several factors, mainly to the strengthening of the bourgeois and mercantile classes, who disapproved of the immorality and cynicism of those

born into the aristocracy as shown on the Restoration stage, and demanded a theater of characters' improvement instead. A playwright of Irish extraction writing for the London stage, George Farquhar is often regarded as a transitional author "between Restoration and eighteenth-century dramatic trends, whose plays show a didactic edge when compared with many comedies from the preceding decades" (Goring 80).

In *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre 1730-1830* Lisa A. Freeman quotes from Horace Walpole's "Thoughts on Comedy" (1775), in which the latter claims that the new playwrights of the period left behind "the acerbic wit and libertine cynicism" of the Restoration period and responded to the needs of their "expanding audience" of middle-class people by assuming a more genteel tone. The quotation from Walpole continues: "comedy thus cast its eyes not on vices of the aristocratic classes, which dominated the Restoration stage, but rather upon the manners, follies and concerns of the middling classes whose influence and power were in the ascendancy in late eighteenth-century England" (73-74). Taking a somewhat different path, in *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre (1737-1832)* Misty G. Anderson claims that Restoration drama influenced Georgian drama, which became "both haunted and animated by its characters and questions" (348) while challenging Restoration playwrights' "assumptions about class, gender, and power" (353). New comedies written in the satirical tradition "downplayed the transactional function of marriage" and "nourished a compensatory narrative of choice, domestic affection, and the substitution of love for lust" as well as celebrating "bourgeois values such as individual merit, domestic affection, and the personal nobility of merchant figures" (Anderson 349-50). Anderson also stresses that "Georgian comedy embraced sentiment as one possible strategy for comedy, differing "most pointedly from earlier comic genres [was] in dramatically reversing the alienation effect of Restoration comedies and demanding emotional involvement with vulnerable suffering characters" (352, 354). In representing social changes, there was a shift towards engaging with "a broader range of class and relative power positions" and the concept of being "gentle" tended to have its basis more in behavior than in bloodline (Anderson 354, 357). Characteristically, the figure of the libertine known from Restoration comedy tended to be tamed and even re-created to embrace a "new function as a self-renouncing figure who already knows better but lacks the will to change" (Anderson 364). The present essay examines the dynamics of the above properties in *A Trip to Bath*, and the ways and modes in which *The Whisperers* recasts and builds on them, to revive the values of a past dramatic tradition in Sheridan's work, and mobilize the potentials of the present for producing a unique piece of collaborative theatre. I argue that this kind of dialogue across centuries can be very fruitful and productive.

Frances Sheridan's first play, *The Discovery* (1763) loosely followed the pattern of sentimental comedy with some original twists, and brought her immediate success. The legendary theater maker, David Garrick acted in it (together with Frances' husband) and was full of praise, calling the work "one of the best comedies he ever read" (qtd. in Brunström 27), which he revived in the Drury Lane Theatre later too. In his book about Irish theater, Christopher Morash underscores that still in the same year "[. . .] the two rival Dublin theatres, Smock Alley and Crow Street, both mounted productions [of *The Discovery*] at the same time, each playing to half-full

houses” (51). What certainly added to the success of the play was that Sheridan constructed multiple plot-lines and innovatively complicated the conventional happy ending. As Conrad Brunström sums up its unique merits, “*The Discovery* is a distinctively hybrid form of entertainment, a play that confounds expectations of comedy and tragedy. While structurally the drama concludes with a melodramatic discovery that facilitates a traditional nuptial denouement, this is a play that, along the way, concerns itself with some of the most corrosively chilling aspects of the human character” (29). Therefore, calling it a conventional sentimental comedy would belittle the playwright’s sophisticated handling of both the genre and the themes addressed. Encouraged by her success in the theater, Sheridan wrote another play, *The Dupe* (1764), which, however, proved a failure mainly because of its tiresome verbosity unhappily counterbalancing the apparent strength of some of the characterizations (especially that of Mrs. Friendly, whose role is unforgettably comic) and the tightness of the plot (Hogan and Beasley 25). As if wishing to take her innovations to the extreme, here Sheridan treats love in such an unsentimental way that she alienated the contemporary audience which “did not react well to what was perceived as coarseness in the play’s satiric humour” (Ó Gallchoir 49). Moreover, no substantial dramaturgical device was employed in *The Dupe* to save the stage production from having a very short run of (the then compulsory) three nights and from becoming registered as a flop.² True, together with the few other Irish-born women playwrights of the period, Sheridan suffered double marginalization: on the one hand, due to “the gendered nature of the theatre as a public space” in which their presence was “only partly tolerated,” while their career also reflected the often looked down on position of those from Dublin “in relation to the dominance of London theatre” on the other (see Ó Gallchoir 50).

By 1764 the playwright’s husband, who often embarked on new projects without the matching financial basis, heaped up a serious amount of debt and found it better to leave for France with his family. It was there that Sheridan began to write a new play named *A Trip to Bath*, also known as *A Journey to Bath* (Hogan and Beasley 25). She gained some experience of the place in the title during a family visit to Bath earlier, where she became familiar with its mixed-class social life. The play was offered to Drury Lane but Garrick rejected it by enumerating his objections in writing. Sheridan refuted all those objections, for her “heavy accusations,” in a response which defends the play, cogently arguing that it fits the contemporary dramatic style adequately:

I do not think it absolutely necessary to interest the passions in a comedy: in a tragedy it is indispensable; but if the Comic Muse can excite curiosity enough to keep up the attention of the audience, she has, in my mind, acquitted herself of her duty and I think this seems to be the general style of some of our most entertaining comedies; and the one in question, I should hope, is not entirely

² A recent video production of *The Dupe* attempts to highlight the merits of the play. It is available now on the internet, accompanied by a discussion of theater experts about it, thanks to the ambitious efforts of the “Lost Ladies of Theatre” project. Plays by other “lost ladies” revived in the project range from Margaret Cavendish to Gertrude Stein.

void of this merit; as the fate of an unworthy project against two innocent young people, artfully carried on, on one side, by a designing pair, and ridiculously supported, on the other, by an absurd pair, is not decided till the very last scene. (qtd. in Hogan and Beasley 26)

In her bold reply to Garrick, Sheridan considers keeping up the attention of the audience as an important requirement which *A Trip to Bath* does fulfill and implies that it is well worthy of being staged. Whether the text she sent to Garrick was a complete five-act play or not, cannot be decided because Sheridan died not long afterwards. The surviving manuscript was published as a fragment only in 1902. It comprises three acts without the usual conclusion to the main plot, although in the above quoted passage the author refers to “the very last scene” where the fate of the joint immoral projects is decided. A possible but not verifiable explanation for this contradiction can be that Sheridan herself destroyed acts four and five, planning to rewrite and improve them, which she, however, was not able to accomplish in the remaining weeks or months of her short life.

Sheridan’s refusal of Garrick’s objections, in fact, provides information on the main plotline as comprising two middle-aged protagonists’ vicious manipulations of two young innocents in *A Trip to Bath*. Critics’ claim that Restoration drama influenced eighteenth-century plays to an extent is proven by Sheridan’s work; however, while drawing on this heritage, she also modified it through various shifts, complications and additions, achieving a comedy which is more satirical than sentimental. The idea of a basic social stratification of the Restoration comedy can be traced in Sheridan’s construction of characters too, but she is more intent on representing social changes with a shift toward engaging with “a broader range of class and relative power positions” (Anderson 354). In *A Trip to Bath* there are basically three distinct social groups: the aristocrats (Lady Filmot, Lady Bell Aircastle, Lord Stewkly), people who did not inherit but earned a title (Sir Jonathan and his brother, Sir Jeremy) and those from the city who make money by holding a job or are related to trade (Mrs. Surface, Mrs. Tryfort, Stapleton, Champignon). This arrangement, reinforced by Sheridan’s choice of speaking names for her characters similar to or even more expressive than the ones occurring in Restoration comedies, results in a nuanced complexity, reflecting the massive changes and transformations that took place in English society throughout the early and middle decades of the eighteenth century.

Members of the first social group, characters of “illustrious birth” as worded by Lady Bell Aircastle (Sheridan-Kuti 26),³ appear in the unpleasant situation of having inherited an aristocratic name and title without the wealth their ancestors once enjoyed. Impoverished gentry as they are, they eagerly try to marry someone for money from the middle classes who possess enough financial means now. Lady Bell is the most hypocritical of the three; while obviously a fortune-hunter, building up castles of air, she expresses contempt for those who have jobs to earn money and looks down on those belonging to the common lot in her eyes. “Oh insufferable! And have I been

3 I use the unpublished manuscript of Kuti’s *The Whisperers or, A Trip to Bath*, which incorporates the three acts Sheridan originally wrote.

acquainted with a fellow that deals in sugar!” (26), she breaks out referring to the merchant Champignon but once she has heard about his (questionable) noble birth, she is more than willing to accept him as a suitor and would-be husband. The name Champignon conjures up a man as unthinking and thriving as a mushroom, who cherishes a strong wish to be connected to the aristocracy by courting and hoping to win Lady Bell. His desire to climb higher on the already shaking social ladder at any cost, confirms the view that many eighteenth-century comedies elucidated how the middle classes were eager to acquire the external forms of “aristocratic refinement,” in the interest of enhancing their social status (Freeman 75).

The designing pair in the play, Lady Filmot and Lord Stewkly, had been lovers before, but early in Act one, start pursuing their plans to marry Edward and Lucy respectively, middle-class youngsters who expect to inherit a fortune from their elders. Lady Filmot and Lord Stewkly represent the seductive “middle-aged coquette” and the unscrupulous “rake” characters which roles appear in many a Restoration comedy. Their ruthless lies, hypocritical pretensions, and duplicity endanger the young people’s planned engagement in Bath on the upcoming twenty-first birthday of the boy. However, unique to Sheridan’s comedy, the coquettish Lady Filmot’s character displays greater complexity than her Restoration forebears; it is suggested that she became the victim of calculating parental authority at quite a young age:

LADY FILMOT: I protest I *liked* you vastly; but for *love*, oh lud! A woman, who at sixteen, consented to a marriage of interest is not very likely at almost double that age, to be a slave to softer passions.

LORD STEWKLY: That match might have convinced me that your heart was never capable of tenderness: So fine a woman, with your understanding and education, to sacrifice herself in the bloom of youth for money!

LADY FILMOT: Nay, the sacrifice was not voluntary neither; I was only passive on the occasion and suffered myself to be persuaded by a Mother, to marry a man for whom I did not care a pinch of snuff, because he was heir to a rich old miser. (5)

Significantly, Lord Stewkly is incapable of imagining that the situation of women differs from his in the patriarchal society in which many families chose to sacrifice their daughters on the altar of a financially promising marriage to a rich suitor. His design is to involve Lucy Tryfort, heir to her grandfather’s wealth as the next kin instead of her presumably deceased uncle, in such a marriage with the more than active help of her widowed mother, Mrs. Tryfort. Lady Filmot is no better in her cunning behavior to entrap Edward, sole heir to a well-to-do tradesman father, but Sheridan endows her at least with the implied excuse that when a young dependent she had been wounded by the same social system and its double standards.

According to the character portrayal throughout, Sheridan saw members of the middle class quite varied and holding diverse views on class positions and barriers. Edward’s father, Sir Jonathan Bull does not question Edward’s original choice to marry Lucy, which Jonathan’s elder brother, Sir Jeremy Bull whole-heartedly detests. Moreover, the latter strongly approves of the tactics Lady Filmot employs to convert

the boy into her beau and enthuses over the prospective match between them: he hopes his nephew may get into parliament and make a career in politics, by means of the title to be gained through marriage. From the start, the brothers have arguments with clashing opinions and expectations regarding Edward's life:

SIR JEREMY: Edward is the only representative of the family and it is fit that the name should be retrieved with some degree of splendor; but instead of that, you want irretrievably to mix the blood with the puddle of City.

SIR JONATHAN: Don't abuse the City, brother, I don't know what we should do without it.

SIR JEREMY: Trade, Sir Jonathan, has abased your ideas.

SIR JONATHAN: I don't understand such fine-spun notions, not I.

SIR JEREMY: I know you don't, and for that reason have often suspected your legitimacy. (9)

His pair in title-hunting is Mrs. Tryfort, who is striving to have her daughter married to Lord Stewkly, evidently with an eye for the title going with the name. Reinforcing the thematic link between the two title-hunter characters, Sir Jeremy and Mrs. Tryfort, whom Sheridan probably meant by her designation an "absurd pair" in her above quoted defense of the play, the mother's reaction to her daughter's disregard for her high-flying social ambitions is similar to Sir Jeremy's suspicion of his brother's legitimacy because of his different attitude. Mrs. Tryfort calls the also middle-class Edward "a little insignificant mechanic" in spite of the fact that formerly she accepted him as Lucy's husband-to-be. When the girl frankly claims that she likes the boy much better than Lord Stewkly, the affronted mother remonstrates: "I declare you are so inarticulate in your notions, that I believe you are a changeling" (30). In this wording Sheridan probably relies on her own knowledge of Irish folklore, in which the "changeling" has had a conspicuous presence and fulfilled the role of unexplainable human transformations for centuries.

The Bull brothers are also distinguished by their language use: Sir Jeremy prefers speaking in high-brow riddles while Sir Jonathan, Edward's father, avoids sophistication, justifying Hogan and Beasley who conclude that Sir Jeremy is a "long winded" egotist, while Sir Jonathan "is a sweet, straightforward, credulous man whose conversation is garrulously friendly" (28). Conspicuously, language has an intensely comic function in the characterization of Mrs. Tryfort. In her essay Kuti pays ample attention to the ways in which Sheridan might have influenced her son's playwriting. Importantly, she notes that Mrs. Tryfort's language blunders in *A Trip to Bath* anticipate Mrs. Malaprop's highly comic and ridiculous verbal mistakes in Richard Brinsley Sheridan's play, *The Rivals*. Kuti dwells on the kinship:

A concern with literacy and the uses of language is common to both plays, but there is an element of realism, even poignancy, in Mrs. Tryfort, absent from the more whimsical Mrs. Malaprop. One reason for this realism is that a central theme of *A Trip to Bath* is the shifting power balance between new mercantile money and old aristocratic blood and lineage; Mrs. Tryfort's effortful and

hypercorrect language is an expression of this bourgeoisie aspiration towards higher things, whereas Mrs. Malaprop's schizophrenically creative language does not have a similarly realistic motivation. (121)

Mrs. Tryfort's *avant la lettre* malapropisms occur in her conversation especially when she strives to impress and urge the nobility to think of her as their ilk. About Lord Stewkly, the man she wishes to be her son-in-law instead of Edward, she says: "To be sure he is one of the best bred, most polite, good humoured charming men living! And takes as much pains to teach my Lucy and make her illiterate as if he were actually her master" (18). She also takes every opportunity to flatter Lord Stewkly, although tends to discredit her eulogies by the same kind of wrong uses: "Ha ha ha, I am generally prodigious lucky indeed, my lord; but this evening I contribute it entirely to your lordship's skill" (37). Anyhow, the artful Lord does not like her less because of her faulty language, she being such a good accomplice in achieving success with his ambition to gain Lucy or, rather, the supposedly abundant heritage she can expect to have soon.

In Sheridan it is a further difference from the Restoration comedy that she draws contrasts between some of the middle-class characters also in terms of their social attitudes and communication with others. While Sir Jonathan and Edward speak their mind, Mrs. Surface, owner of the guesthouse in which the plot is set, uses a lot of asides to make vicious comments on her guests while she incarnates politeness itself to their face. No doubt, her views are based on superficial experiences and she makes no effort to look beyond what she sees on the surface. The expression of servility to him as a paying guest and that of annoyance by Stapleton's remarks almost in the same breath, clearly betrays her hypocrisy: "Good morning to you, good Sir, and a pleasant walk to you, dear Sir - A peevish Cur, but I had rather have him than an empty room" (4). Among the characters Stapleton is a rather mysterious one who does not take part in the social life of Bath, yet appears to be a sharp-eyed observer of shifts in the relationships and notices the intrigues and selfish games of the aristocrats, those of Lady Filmot in particular. He is also a character whose opinion and attitudes demonstrate personal development. At first he thinks of the benignly garrulous Sir Jonathan as a mere source of information: "The man seems to be thrown in my way on purpose: I'll cultivate his acquaintance. The communicativeness of his temper will be a means to gratify my curiosity" (8). As a keen observer of other people's ambition-driven movements and altering connections, later he even warns the naively incredulous Sir Jonathan, almost like a friend would do, that Lady Filmot has menacing designs on his son: "Sir, she said enough to him to have alarmed a parent" (27).

Showing the characters in disguise and initiating or taking part in games as well as the setting up of masquerades are often applied staples of comedy both in the Restoration era and the eighteenth century. For instance, in Act four, Scene one of George Etherege's *The Man of Mode or, Sir Fopling Flutter* (1676), male characters appear in masks, which enable them to speak and act freely. A later Restoration comedy, *Love for Love* (1695) by Richard Congreve, shows parallels with *A Trip to Bath* in that the young couple Valentine and Angelica pretend to be mad and to

marry someone else respectively, in order to test the honesty and constancy of the other's love. Sheridan complicates the device of pretensions by having Lady Filmot and Lord Stewkly persuade Edward and Lucy to enter into playing games with them, which is doubly self-serving on their part: the ex-lovers Lady and Lord want to make each other jealous while attempting to alienate the young people from each other, with the ultimate aim to lure them into accepting their plans for marriage. Characteristically, their dishonest tactics are thoroughly gendered. The Lord asks Lucy to be an accomplice in his practical joke of "making love to another woman" (22) right before the Lady's face, which the girl is willing to do if it is "not in Earnest" (23)—using a phrase that anticipates Oscar Wilde, the devoted admirer of Restoration- and eighteenth-century drama. Lady Filmot manages to charm the youth, Edward with her ingeniously employed language of coquetry: "Insinuating creature! I shall be almost afraid to trust myself with you - But come, you shall go home with me, and I'll transform you into a beau in a trice" (29). Obviously, she wants to arouse the boy, yet her sexually charged language barely verges on the shameless outspokenness in, for instance, *Love for Love*.

The third and last act in Sheridan's surviving play concludes with the meeting and unfolding conversation of the two main aristocratic fortune-hunters, Lady Filmot and Lord Stewkly, about how they have fared with their respective projects of courting the young people up to that point. However, more becomes revealed, especially about the woman's innermost feelings. The ambiguities woven through the characters' talk in the Restoration comedy, for instance in *The Man of Mode* between Mrs. Loveit and Dorimant, find their nuanced echo in Sheridan's last scene. The Lord seems to believe that their adventures targeting the two youngsters follow the same pattern and leading to the same desired effect without reflecting on it, but Lady Filmot responds to the man in ambiguous sentences which hover between surface and depth, semblance and truth. However, repeating his former insensitivity to the woman's painful memories of her early marriage, Lord Stewkly is not able to decode and understand her real meaning:

LADY FILMOT: . . . Do you know that we are to meet at Lyncoln Spa tomorrow morning? I proposed the assignation; he [Edward] bowed, and said he wouldn't fail, for the tender creature really begins to pity me.

LORD STEWKLY: Ha haha! How could you bring him to do that with so utter an insensibility on your side astonishes me!

LADY FILMOT: Take it for granted, a woman never plays the coquet well with a man she really loves. I acknowledge myself one, intended so by Nature; who the better to enable me to act my part, never incommoded me with those troublesome companions called tender feelings: women who have those sometimes affect our character; but it never sits easy on them. (45)

Lord Stewkly makes no comment whatsoever on this, which indicates his myopia and egoism; his cynical reply focuses solely on his own progress toward gaining Lucy. When they separate, the Lady says goodbye in a way that exacerbates the enigmatic nature of her communication with him: "Adieu, cruel indifferent!" (46). The wording

might imply that she still feels emotionally attached to Lord Stewkly, her former lover, and seems to be hurt by his inconsiderate bluntness.

A dedicated researcher of Irish women's drama, Kuti decided to add two acts and make Sheridan's text complete under a new title, *The Whisperers*. The title is certainly appropriate as several of the characters Sheridan started to draw and Kuti finished, often whisper to one another to keep something in secret. Most poignantly does so Lady Filmot to display her intimacy with Edward, thus intending to take revenge on Lord Stewkly whose flirtation with Lucy is much to her dislike. Besides, the many instances of speaking behind another's back and the often rudely impolite asides also contribute to the satirical representation of this Bath mini-society as one which largely fails on honesty and trustfulness. In 1999, the thus reborn drama, *The Whisperers* went into production by Rough Magic Theatre Company under the direction of Lynne Parker, and had a successful run in Dublin and many other Irish towns. It travelled to the Edinburgh Festival as well, and a few years later enjoyed a revival in New York as part of a "series of mainstage productions and workshop performances presented during the month of March and titled "Shadowed Voices: Female Playwrights of Ireland Heard!" (Anon).

The Whisperers fits in with the general characteristics of the rather loose term, "adaptation." Scholars largely agree that there are many forms of adaptation, which they view as a transhistorical and transmedial strategy and phenomenon. Julie Sanders's study *Adaptation and Appropriation*, for example, begins with the possible definitions of the terms in the title relying on the theoretical positions of some other scholars of the subject, including Julia Kristeva, Linda Hutcheon, and J. Hillis Miller. The critic states that "[t]he vocabulary of the adaptation is rather labile" and, to highlight only those terms which may be relevant to the generic state of *The Whisperers*, "continuation," "supplement," "addition," and "reworking" feature in Sanders's lengthy list (3). Each of these needs and evokes a complex methodology of critically addressing the literary work to which it gives a new life. The strategy of completing a text might carry a certain ideological force and purport to achieve an intervention into form. In a theoretically grounded essay, Sara Soncini approaches *The Whisperers* as a unique case of intertextuality, which presents "a critique of, at one and the same time, the post-Romantic paradigm of originality and individual authorship, and the postmodern predicament of authorless (inter)textuality" (141).

Mapping the genesis of *The Whisperers*, a crucial question touches on the principles Kuti established for herself while working on this special form of adaptation, which involves moving the original into a new cultural and historical context. About her methodological approach and strategies to complete Sheridan's drama for the contemporary Irish and British stage, in an interview she said:

I set myself some ground rules – I wasn't going to create any new characters, but I was going to use the eleven people she created to tell the rest of the story. I used Acts one to three as my source material – i.e. all the clues you need to know how the story finishes and how the plot works out are all there in the first three acts – I think this would be true of any 18th century play. So I just kept to what she had written and tried to be faithful to it. (Kurdi 12)

About the issue whether twentieth-century viewpoints should be apparent in the text, Kuti adds in the same interview that “in the end I felt that I wanted, more or less, to reconstruct the last two acts in the spirit and voice of Sheridan’s original” (Kurdi 12). Not investing it with meanings that would deviate from what Sheridan’s original suggested, Kuti presented a co-authored and not a revised play, which she succeeded in making coherent on the levels of both thought and organization. Soncini regards Kuti as a postmodern author who “playfully casts herself as a plagiarist, mixing her voice with that of her collaborator, and deliberately blurring the contours of authorial identities” (150). In my view, plagiarism can hardly be a relevant term here, given Kuti’s exact positioning of the finished play.

Reviewing the first production of *The Whisperers*, Karen Ficker claims: “While Kuti creates seamless links in the plot and character between the two halves of the play and it all ends up where one feels Sheridan was heading, Kuti’s half moves more briskly, her jokes have more zing, and she handles the resolution of the plots with a deep appreciation of our contemporary need for psychological depth and believability.” Apart from this much deserved praise, the author finds that Stapleton’s significance in the resolution of Edward, Lucy, and Lady Filmot’s plotline has not been hinted at sooner. This point of Ficker’s can certainly be debated. In fact, the arrangement that Stapleton is the character who first appears on stage in Act one and remains an enigmatic, strangely melancholic presence throughout, calls attention to him in Sheridan’s fragment. Even the experienced and often too inquisitive Mrs. Surface does not know where to place him, therefore she simply detests the man for his peculiar behavior and labels him a “whimsical captious fellow” (34).

It is a conventional staple of drama that if an enigma features in the plot, it should be resolved before the end, and Kuti rightly sensed that the clues Sheridan provided by Stapleton’s keen awareness of the movements of Lady Filmot, Lucy, and Edward, are to be followed when knotting the dramatic plotlines to a climax in *The Whisperers*. In Act five, during the masquerade, the prospective organization of which was hinted at by Sheridan’s manuscript, Stapleton un.masks himself as Richard Tryfort, uncle of Lucy, who was thought to have died in the Far East. A private scene in the same act between him and Lady Filmot informs the audience that Stapleton/Tryfort is her runaway husband, which explains his keen interest in the Lady’s movements from early on, as portrayed by Sheridan. The man made a fortune in the colonies and now hardly needs the wealth that could be his since his father died without leaving a will behind. Importantly, Stapleton/Tryfort allows Lucy to have the inheritance and leaves England for good. The obvious ethical dimension of his act shows how noble-minded a middle-class person can be and thus morally superior to the vicious Lord and Lady, in line with the changing class structure and related identity issues of eighteenth-century England. His adopted name, Stapleton, has more than one meaning as a common noun and here it expresses not only the character’s essentialness to the play as already suggested by the original, but Kuti’s addition reveals his capacity to (re)join the two hesitant lovers, Edward and Lucy.

Kuti’s text also contains Wildean elements, of course not unconsciously anticipating Wilde’s drawing on Restoration and eighteenth-century comedy as Sheridan did, but as a playful imitation of Gwendolyn’s style in talking to her lover Jack/Earnest.

When in Act five of *The Whisperers* Edward finally turns his back on Lady Filmot and expresses his love for Lucy and intention to share his life with her, the girl reacts: “What a long time you have been about it Edward!” (83). Another motif, which Wilde borrowed from Restoration comedy, is the prospect of multiple weddings at the end of a comedy. Apart from the Lucy-Edward couple in *The Whisperers*, Lady Bell also says yes to Champignon’s wish to marry her. In Sheridan’s fragment Champignon seems to be a gullible copy of Lord Stewkly. They are reminiscent of the gallant/fop pairing in Restoration drama, although in a twisted form. This kind of character pairing is discussed by Gămini Salgădo, referring to Dorimant and Sir Fopling Flutter in *The Man of Mode or, Sir Fopling Flutter* as representing such a pair. The critic claims that in the drama Sir Fopling Flutter is “a slightly distorted mirror-image of the hero, Dorimant” and invites laughter because he is unsuccessful in his efforts to be like the hero (16-17). Sheridan’s Lord Stewkly is an anti-hero, who cunningly offers his assistance to the wealthy Champignon to acquire a (fake) knighthood for a nice sum of money. Kutu takes this cue and in *The Whisperers* Lord Stewkly rooks Champignon and manages to get a high fee for the red ribbon (a cheap thing bought in the town by Mrs. Surface) from him, which he, the Lord, pockets without feeling any scruple. The act makes a ridiculous fop of Champignon, and the immorality of the anti-hero Lord Stewkly is all the more highlighted while the middle-class Stapleton/Tryfort proves to be the real gallant of the play.

An episode which at first sight seems to be out of key with Sheridan’s original occurs in the last scene of *The Whisperers*: an agitated Champignon complains to Lord Stewkly about having lost his fortune when his merchant ships carrying goods got wrecked, for which he blames “[t]hose barbarous dogs of sailors” (80) and not himself for risking such an outcome without having an insurance coverage. No direct or indirect information is provided regarding the truth of the disaster, moreover, the financial consequences for Champignon are not suggested either. The unexpectedly introduced story of the shipwreck functions as a postmodern game of the contemporary author, leaving the reader/audience to their own resources as to interpreting this blind spot in the denouement of the completed play. One might conclude that Champignon’s prospective union of interest with Lady Bell (the woman yet ignorant of the loss of the cargo), will be that of a penniless fortune hunter with a ridiculous affectation of being high class and an unthinking, doubly cheated title hunter turned out of his finances, soon leading to mutual disappointment and likely to ruin their marriage. The contrast with the Lucy-Edward couple’s future based on love is, indeed, striking.

Mic Moroney’s fundamentally positive review of the first production of *The Whisperers* in *The Guardian* states that “Obviously, the final act is rather different from the ending that Sheridan would have intended to write. The completed play would probably have dwelt more extensively on Lady Filmot’s rise and fall. Yet, although Kutu misses the understated social sting of the original sections, she manages a complex and very entertaining pastiche.” It is perhaps Moroney, who misses the social implications of the understated references to gender inequalities in Sheridan’s drama, which Kutu herself did recognize. Aware of the crucial importance of the dialogue between Lady Filmot and Lord Stewkly which closes Sheridan’s third act, Kutu’s dramaturgical choice to orchestrate another dialogue of the same two at the very end

of the whole play, rings in tune with what the eighteenth-century author suggested. While Sheridan's work shows more than just a discussion but also hints at how Lady Filmot feels about the role she is playing, in Kuti's addition the failed manipulators start navigating closer to each other again, presumably motivated by the fact that Stapleton/Tryfort, the Lady's disappeared husband provides some annuity for her before he leaves England forever. Lord Stewkly hopes to become a reformed man in the possibly renewable relationship and Lady Filmot proposes drinking with him "To love and tender feelings!" yet quickly adds: "And the day we are rich enough to afford them" (88). The ambiguity which appears in the dialogue posited by Sheridan has its continuation in Kuti: the honest feelings they have seen in Lucy and Edward, as well as in Stapleton/Tryfort's generosity might be an influence on the potential change of their attitudes, although they also remain absolutely conscious of and influenced by the connection between love, marriage and money. The "social sting" of the original that Moroney misses from the two acts written by Kuti is conveyed by the whole five-act drama because even the conjugal bliss of Lucy and Edward is secured by the fortunately available financial means in the long run.

Kuti's completion of the original text to breathe new life into *The Whisperers* can be credited with strengthening the representation of some (certainly not all) middle class characters as sympathetic and morally superior to the aristocratic ones. The genuine love of Lucy and Edward triumphs over the greedy and soulless calculations of those characters who have no fears to manipulate and even ruin others, in spite of their "illustrious birth." By its devices and dramaturgical choices *The Whisperers* re-animates the social and emotional variedness of the best of eighteenth-century comedy, along with its embedded social critique. The smoothly handled dual authorship and the well-chosen strategies of adaptation jointly contribute to the coherence of subject matter and style in the renewed five-act play, justifying both Frances Sheridan's merits and Kuti's achievement in writing her eighteenth-century forebear back into the history of Irish drama.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Misty G. "Genealogies of Comedy." *The Oxford Handbook of the Georgian Theatre (1737-1832)*, edited by Julia Swindells and David Francis Taylor, Oxford UP, 2014, pp. 346-67.
- Anon. "Irish women will be heard." *Peoples World*, March 11, 2005, <https://www.peoplesworld.org/article/irish-women-will-be-heard/>.
- Ficker, Karen. "The Whisperers." *Variety*, May 10, 1999, <https://variety.com/1999/film/reviews/the-whisperers-2-1200457811/>.
- Freeman, Lisa A. "The social life of eighteenth-century comedy." *The Cambridge Companion to British Theatre 1730-1830*, edited by Jane Moody and Daniel O'Quinn, Cambridge UP, 2009, pp. 73-86.

Goring, Paul. *Eighteenth-Century Literature and Culture*. Continuum, 2008.

Hartvig, Gabriella. "Early Advertisements of *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph*." *Critical Essays in Honour of Mária Kurdi*, edited by Zsuzsa Csikai and Andrew C. Rouse, SPECHEL e-editions, 2017, pp. 49–62.

Kurdi, Mária. "Interview with Elizabeth Kuti." *Irish Literary Supplement*, vol. 23, nr. 1, 2004, pp. 11–12.

———. "Rewriting Frances Sheridan." *Eighteenth Century Ireland*, vol. 11, 1996, pp. 120–28.

———. "'Strangeness Made Sense': Reflections on Being a Non-Irish Irish Playwright." *Irish Drama: Local and Global Perspectives*, edited by Nicholas Grene and Patrick Lonergan, Carysfort Press, 2012, pp. 141–62.

Kuti, Elizabeth. *The Whisperers*. Unpublished manuscript. Courtesy of the author.

Morash, Christopher. *A History of Irish Theatre 1601-2000*, Cambridge UP, 2002.

Moroney, Mic. "Worth the wait"? *The Guardian*, 15 May 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/1999/may/15/books.guardianreview12>.

Ó Gallchoir, Cliona. "Eighteenth-Century Writing." *A History of Modern Irish Women's Literature*, edited by Heather Ingman and Cliona Ó Gallchoir, Cambridge UP, 2018, pp. 37–58.

Salgãdo, Gămini. "Introduction." *Three Restoration Comedies*. Ed. and Introd. Gămini Salgãdo, Penguin, 1968, pp. 11–40.

Sheridan, Frances. *The Plays of Frances Sheridan*. Ed. and Introd. Robert Hogan and Jerry C. Beasley, Associated UP, 1984.

Soncini, Sara. "Intertextuality, Collaboration and Gender in *The Whisperers*, or, 'Frances Sheridan's *A Trip to Bath* as completed by Elizabeth Kuti.'" *Collaboration in the Arts from the Middle Ages to the Present*, edited by Silvia Bigliuzzi, Routledge, 2006, pp. 139–50.