

# Kate Bush, The Red Shoes, The Line, the Cross and the Curve and the Uses of Symbolic Transformation

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## Abstract

In Kate Bush's 1993 album, *The Red Shoes*, and her film, *The Line, the Cross and the Curve*, she engages with the symbolism of *The Red Shoes* fairytale as first depicted in Hans Christian Andersen's 1845 fairy tale and later developed by the Powell and Pressburger film (1948) of the same name. In Bush's versions of the tale she attempts to find a space of agency for the main female protagonist in a plot structure over-determined by patriarchal narrative and symbolic logic. I will argue that it is through her own use of mystical symbolism – the Line, the Cross and the Curve – mediated through the deployment of ritual magick and kabbalistic ritual – that she breaks the 'spell' of the red shoes story where the main female character can escape the gender specific 'curse' of the red shoes.

## Keywords

Kabbalah, Kate Bush, Ritual Magick, symbolism

## Introduction

In Kate Bush's 1993 album *The Red Shoes* and film *The Line, the Cross and the Curve*, the nineteenth century bourgeois morality fairy tale, 'The Red Shoes' is recast as a powerful spell that the main female protagonist needs to break. The original story will, perhaps, be familiar to you: a young girl, Karen, obsessively covets a pair of shiny red shoes and wears them in socially unsuitable situations – her mother's funeral and at Sunday mass – where she transgresses the social mores to which young girls are supposed to adhere. As a consequence of Karen's vanity, she is punished when a spell is cast over the red shoes. These place her in trouble because the shoes she loves to wear 'could not

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listen/They could not stop'.<sup>1</sup> Eventually her feet dance so much that she begs the local executioner to cut them off (but not her head, so she can enjoy her suffering and repent accordingly). She is given a pair of wooden crutches that she stumbles to her final communion with God on, as her soul flies up to heaven and 'her heart became so filled with sunshine, peace and joy, that it broke.'<sup>2</sup>

Andersen's story is an example of a cautionary, Christian morality tale which reveals, according to Jack Zipes, 'the structure[s] of relationships as they were being formed and solidified around emerging bourgeois domination in the nineteenth-century.'<sup>3</sup> Emphasizing the Christian context of the tale is important for understanding how Bush's use of occult practices and immanent based spirituality challenge the symbolic logic of those systems. While in Andersen's story the 'magic' of the spell that afflicts the red shoes is explained away through the suspension of disbelief that is granted to the fairy tale genre, in Bush's versions 'the spell' is more explicitly melded with magickal practices that similarly need to be reversed through magickal intervention.

In this article, I will explore how Bush uses self-devised, counter-symbolic formations in order to undermine the immense symbolic power 'The Red Shoes' story holds within the popular imaginary – and over the possibility for women's agency within these storytelling practices. In so doing, I will demonstrate how Bush draws on a range of occult practices – including spells, ritual and witchcraft which enact and celebrate immanent, feminine spirituality – and argue that they are central to understanding the ways in which Bush subverts the forms of patriarchal control mediated through the symbolic logic of The Red Shoes story. Finally, I will argue that Bush's use of invented symbolism in *The Line, the Cross and the Curve* underwrites white racialized symbolism of the Christian morality tale endemic to the original tale.

## The Story of a Symbol

We enjoy the symbol, but we also penetrate to the meaning. The symbols do not create their meaning: the meaning, in the form of actual effective beings reacting upon us, exists for us in its own right. But the symbols discover this meaning for us.<sup>4</sup>

In Alfred North Whitehead's formulation he articulates the extra-territorial grip that symbols effect upon those that encounter them. The meanings are 'actual effective beings reacting *upon* us', existing 'in [their] own right' (*italics mine*). This description also resonates with Dion Fortune's conception of symbolic effect as a meditative force operating beyond the confines of rational knowledge. Symbolic realization, she argues, travels up the 'stairway of realisation step by step' to help the mind 'to climb where it

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- 1 Sexton A (1993) The Red Shoes. In: Sexton A, *Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*. London: Virago, 87.
  - 2 Andersen HC (1998) The Red Shoes. In: *The Complete Fairy Tales*. Ware: Wordsworth, 322–29, especially 329.
  - 3 Zipes J (1999) *When Dreams Come True: Classical Fairy Tales and Their Tradition*. London: Routledge, 90.
  - 4 Whitehead AN (1959) *Symbolism, its Meaning and Effect*. New York: Capricorn Books, 57.

cannot fly.’<sup>5</sup> What both writers articulate is the particular hold that symbols have on the minds, bodies and cultures that they enter *upon*. ‘The Red Shoes’ as a symbol is no different. Arguably, the more a symbol is re-used the more powerful it gets – it acquires dimensions, its magic more pervasive: ‘the symbols discover this meaning for us.’

Within twentieth century popular culture, the red shoes as symbol and tale was subject to a number of interpretations and re-uses. In 1948 the story was further mythologized by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s film, *The Red Shoes*. In this version they moved Karen’s story out of the church and into the dance rehearsal room, exchanging dour Christian morality for high camp antics as the opulent spirit of the red shoes was breathed into the decadent but cut-throat world of modern ballet. It is this interpretation of the story that holds a particularly strong influence on the visual dynamics of Bush’s engagement in *The Line, the Cross and the Curve*. In her film she mimics scenes and characters that suggest its strong influence not only on this film, but on her career as a whole. For Powell and Pressburger’s version of *The Red Shoes* would have an obvious resonance for Bush, who has constructed her public persona as a dancer as much as a musician, writer and producer of her work, to the point where her relationship to expression through movement is unique in the pop world.

Bush’s re-writing of *The Red Shoes* was typically ambitious, encompassing both a full-length album carrying that name, and a 45 minute film, *The Line, the Cross and the Curve*, containing songs from the album. The release of the film and the album at the same time prompts questions regarding how they should be read. For example, can they be read against one another, so that the meaning is enhanced when text and film interact; or should they be read as separate pieces of art? I will be situating my reading in the interaction between the album and film. In terms of my own personal experience of engaging with these musical and visual texts, it was the album that I encountered first, seeing the film some years later. Upon watching the film my understanding of the album was transformed, as the songs took on new and enhanced meanings. However, I think both video and text can be read separately, as Bonnie Gordon does in her article ‘Kate Bush’s Subversive Shoes.’<sup>6</sup> That is to say, they remain independent from one another even as their contents merge in an experiment in fairy tale re-visioning. The film creates a new narrative that expands upon the album, developing Bush’s penchant for conceptual sound and visual art that characterizes her career.

For women artists in particular, who contributed more and more to the production of culture in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the symbol of the red shoes holds a unique attraction due to the curse that surrounds them: wearing the shoes almost certainly results in a very gender-specific death. The challenge presented by the shoes then, is to inhabit and reclaim them as a positive symbol, to harness them in support of women’s creative powers, sustenance and renewal: a tactic that can be seen in the musical film *The Wizard of Oz*, for example. In this film the red shoes act as a source of strength and protection from the wicked witch’s power that tries to destroy the main character Dorothy.

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5 Fortune D (1974) *The Mystical Qabalah*. London: Ernest Benn, 29.

6 Gordon B (2005) Kate Bush’s subversive shoes. *Women and Music: A Journal of Gender and Culture* 9: 37–50.

This successful instance where the red shoes are harnessed for personal control is unusual since their symbolism is generally used to signal an undoing of personal equilibrium. Arguably, other symbolism in *The Line, the Cross and the Curve* alludes to *The Wizard of Oz*, such as the invocation of the power of three that roughly corresponds to the function of the line, cross and curve symbols in Bush's film: brain, heart and courage. This breaks up the singularity of symbolic logic which governs the red shoes story, by splitting the symbol into triadic space where multiple and divergent sites of entry can emerge.

The title of *The Line, the Cross and the Curve* not only moves away from the singular symbolic logic of the red shoes, but also displays a desire to break with simple re-writings of the story. It is taken from symbols Bush invented for the film in order to rewrite the destiny of an unnamed female character who finds herself embedded in the story of the red shoes:

With no words, with no song  
You can dance the dream, with your body on  
And this curve, is your smile  
And this cross, is your heart  
And this line, is your path.<sup>7</sup>

These three symbols are suggestive of equilibrium and direction, important qualities that elude the girl in the original tale, whose balance and control are displaced, while disorder and possession are imposed upon her from without by forces that demonize her. Extending the terrain of symbols away from the singly symbolic power of the red shoes does offer a potential narrative opening from an inevitable end of hopeless suicide. In *The Line, the Cross and the Curve*, the attempted transformation of the symbolic universe of the tale addresses the insufficiencies of the original while also clearly reusing both tale and its retelling in the 1948 film as paradigmatic grains to move against.

The most striking and positive aspect of Bush's reclamation of the red shoes is in the areas where she *does* gain agency and empowerment for the female character. She does this within a cultural narrative that previously offered, at worse, a valorization of extreme punishment for the self-desiring mobile woman and, at best, an evincing of a sympathetic sensibility. This kind of sympathy can be seen in the powerful tragedy depicted at the end of the Powell and Pressburger film where the empty spotlight where Page is supposed to dance evokes a sense of deep tragedy (as opposed to death being a just punishment for her vanity). Moreover, Bush's versions are the first explicit re-writings of the tale – excluding Sexton's poem in *Transformations* – written by a woman who *chooses* to adorn herself with, and place herself within, the tale, imagery and symbol of the red shoes. She claims the red shoes as a powerful statement of her own autonomy against the forces that destroy the girls in previous versions of the tale: she is writer, producer, dancer and musician of the music, text and movement.

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<sup>7</sup> Bush K (1993) *The Red Shoes* (EMI: B000024BBU). References to the album will be followed by italicized initials in parentheses after quote (RS).

## Ritual Reclamation and the Search for Alternative Meaning

The layers of meaning in *The Red Shoes* and *The Line, the Cross and the Curve* are multiple. Both are deeply saturated with references to spirituality and healing, and carry a deep preoccupation with symbols, rituals and magic as avenues for salvation and energetic transformation. Do the spiritual universes explored and represented on *The Red Shoes* offer an exit from the affliction the shoes carry within them? What insights into the work can be gained through an engagement with the symbols as not merely expressive of *meaning*, but as part of wider ritualistic traditions that offer a different conceptual map from which to understand relationships to mortality, ontology and perception?

Spirituality and healing have always interplayed with other arenas of Bush's work; she displayed an interest in the occult early in her career. She explored non-western philosophical and spiritual traditions on 1978's *The Kick Inside* with 'Strange Phenomena', 'Sat in Your Lap' on 1982's *The Dreaming*; while on 'The Ninth Wave' on 1985's *Hounds of Love* album she dramatized a shamanic rebirth quest.<sup>8</sup> Later work, such as 'How to Be Invisible' on 2005's *Aerial*, carries on these tendencies by using a spell as the basis for song lyrics. However, it is on *The Line, the Cross and the Curve* where there latent interest the occult, spirituality and ritual is synthesized and deployed for the purposes of social critique as well as artistic expression.

In the early stages of the film there is something particularly unconventional about Bush's presentation to the viewer. After the tortuous dancing of 'Rubberband Girl', which opens *The Line, the Cross and the Curve* and sees Bush struggling with an oversized strait jacket as if to acknowledge the popular conception of her as a 'madwoman', we encounter Bush alone, dressed in black and surrounded by candles in her music room singing 'It Must Be Love'. The slow ballad, that laments the pain of loving and relationships, is dramatized by the eeriness of the scene: there is a lack of electricity, which gives the room, lit only by a solitary candle and flashes of lightning, an archaic feeling. Bush's magic, and thus her deviance, is connected to her ability to compose music, and viewers are encouraged to note the musical score sheets that are scattered about her room.

This scene also features a blackbird, an animal that Bush referred to in her earlier work 'Waking the Witch' from *Hounds of Love*, that connected the bird to witches:

Poor little thing  
The blackbird  
Wings in the water – go down...  
"She's a witch"  
(Help this blackbird, there's a stone around my leg)  
"Uh, Damn you woman!"<sup>9</sup>

8 See Withers D (2008) *Kate Bush: invocations, performances and transformations of the feminine subject*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Swansea, Wales: 299–311.

9 Bush K (1985) *Hounds of Love* (EMI: EJ 24 03841). Subsequent references to the album will appear in parentheses after quote (*HL*).

Blackbirds are synonymous with the evocation of a witchlike presence in Bush's own mythological universe and can be seen as akin to her familiar, a witch's spirit ally and mediator between human, animal and spirit worlds.<sup>10</sup> In folklore blackbirds are often seen as symbols of darkness, sin and the temptations of the flesh.<sup>11</sup> 'And So Is Love' shows Bush tenderly holding a blackbird before she releases it into the room, where it flies into a window and consequently dies. Bush then picks up the bird (who lands on her music) and places it upon some red velvet fabric, kissing it as she does so. Here she displays her mourning for a bird that is symbolically connected to the power of darkness, and aligns herself with it.<sup>12</sup>

In the next scene in the film there is a further, important reshaping of the red shoes tale as another female character is introduced who is similarly under the 'spell' of the red shoes. This unnamed female character breaks Bush's solitude as she runs through the mirror from the Underworld as lightning flashes; presumably drawn toward Bush because she has particular powers. She begs Bush to help her break the spell of the shoes and engages her in conducting a spell: she is to draw three symbols – the line, the cross and the curve – on a piece of paper which will enable the woman (played by Miranda Richardson) to return home. Bush easily takes up the challenge while their interaction suggests that Bush's character has a previous familiarity with magic. The paper flies into the hands of the unnamed woman in a seemingly magical way, encouraging viewers to note the occurrence of a spell.

All of this activity occurs during the performance of the song, 'The Red Shoes,' which impels Bush's character to 'move like the diva do' (*RS*) and put on the red shoes which places her under their spell. In a moment that recalls and rewrites Victoria Page's dance before the mirror in the dream sequence of Powell and Pressburger's *The Red Shoes*, Bush's character, out of control with the shoes on, moves through the symbolic restraint of its surface into the Underworld, which is also evocative of Jean Cocteau's surrealist film, *The Blood of a Poet*.<sup>13</sup> As Bush is transported into the Underworld, her appearance becomes further evidence of heretical behaviour that deviates from the Christian moral values that form the basis of the original tale. In the mirror world she is plastered with starkly contrasting white and red make-up on her face as she writhes and dances in demonic ecstasy through the fire.

Spirituality and divination are central to the process of redemption that is explored in the universe on the other side of the mirror. Unlike Karen in the original tale, Bush is able to harness these spiritual powers for instruction, guidance and protection, the complete opposite of the original tale where spirituality and religion are used to prolong punishment and confer judgement upon her bodily and spiritual 'sin'. The appearance of Bush's real-life healer Lily in the song 'Lily' is a pivotal moment in the healing process depicted within *The Line, the Cross and the Curve*. The prayer that Lily utters includes lines from Starhawk's 'Charge of the Goddess' (1979/1999) – 'From me all things proceed and unto me they must return'<sup>14</sup> – as Bush's character clings onto her body in a desperate fashion, communicating to the viewer her state of emotional and spiritual turmoil:

10 Wilby E (2005) *Cunning Folk and Familiar Spirits: Shamanistic Visionary Traditions in Early Modern British Witchcraft and Magic*. Brighton: Sussex, 61.

11 Cooper JC (1992) *Symbolic and Mythological Animals*. London: Harper Collins, 83.

12 Starhawk (1982) *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

13 Cocteau J (1930/2005) *The Blood of a Poet/ Testament of Orpheus* (B0006GVK4I).

14 Starhawk (1979/1999) *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 3.

Well I said Lily, Oh Lily  
 I don't feel safe  
 I feel that life has blown a great big hole Through me  
 And she said Child, you must protect  
 yourself I'll show you how with fire (*RS*).

Through Lily a healing ritual is initiated that will be recognized by practitioners of classic Kabbalah as the Lesser Banishing Ritual of the Pentagram. As Nevill Drury explains:

in ceremonial magic [it is] a ritual designed to ward off negative and evil influences. The banishing ritual of the Lesser Pentagram is performed in a magical circle and commences in the East. The magician uses a sword to inscribe pentagrams in the air and invokes the archangels Raphael, Gabriel, Michael, and Uriel at the four quarters. The banishing also includes a ritual Prayer known as the "Kabbalistic Cross".<sup>15</sup>

Both the song and film directly reference this ritual practice: from the song we hear the invocation, while in the film viewers see the angels rise in their quarters as a circle of fire is drawn, creating a sacred and protected space around Bush's character. Bush places an important piece of ritual magic at the centre of 'Lily', creating a re-enactment of ritualistic practices every time the song is listened to:

Gabriel before me  
 Raphael behind me  
 Michael to my right  
 Uriel on my left side  
 In the circle of fire (*RS*).

The invocation of the archangels directly connects the ritual with the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, as each angel rules a quarter that corresponds to an element and direction: Gabriel (West, Water); Raphael (East, Air); Michael (South, Fire) and Uriel (North, Earth).<sup>16</sup> According to Dion Fortune, this ritual can be used for a number of things: to act as a ritual of protection against psychic attack, to purify or clear a room before a ritual, or simply as aid to meditation, promoting a clear mind free from outside influences.<sup>17</sup> In the film's narrative it seems to be working on all of these levels. The ritual acts as an avenue through which to reclaim personal power within the tale and mitigate the harm of the spell that was imposed upon Bush (the symbolic power of hetero-patriarchy symbolized by the red shoes). 'This is my space' (*RS*) she sings, as she redraws her boundaries in a protective manner.

This ritual creates a crucial site where the power of Bush's character is replenished in the story after her altruistic possession by the red shoes. As Carol Christ argues, 'rituals enhance the power of symbols because they involve the body, the source of our deepest feeling' whilst speaking to the 'conscious and unconscious mind, uniting

15 Drury N (2005) *The Watkins Dictionary of Magic*. London: Watkins, 34.

16 Drury N (2005) *The Watkins Dictionary of Magic*. London: Watkins, 295.

17 Fortune D (1986) *Psychic Self-Defence*. San Francisco, CA: Red Wheel, 190.

rational awareness with our deepest nonrational knowledge.’<sup>18</sup> In other words, rituals work in an embodied and emotional manner, breaking down dualisms and uniting forms of understanding that are normatively placed in opposition to one another (such as rational and irrational). They do not transcend these systems but work immanently within them, re-ordering the social and sacred universe, creating a culture with a different mythos where ‘new values and new ways of living are made possible.’<sup>19</sup> Dion Fortune further elaborates on this point:

The Qabalists [...] do not try to explain to the mind that which the mind is not equipped to deal with; they give it a series of symbols to meditate upon, and these enable it to build the stairway of realisation step by step and to climb where it cannot fly.<sup>20</sup>

Deploying symbols thus, creates a series of alternative co-ordinates from which to understand phenomena, that places realizations achieved through symbolic meditations at the centre of its ‘logic’. This system operates at a far different level to the rational mind which cannot ‘fly’ to these realms of understanding, which opens up possibilities for understanding the function of symbols in *The Line, the Cross and the Curve*. Consequently, the use of ritual, magic and symbols in *The Line, the Cross and the Curve* fragments the power of the story’s traditional symbology which is based on a symbolic system that encases women and punishes their desire for autonomy, self-desire and movement, symbolized by the red shoes.

Following the Kabbalistic ritual in the film, Bush is seen falling into a meditative space, and the ritual strengthens her in the fight to reverse the power of the spell of the line, the cross and the curve. In the song ‘Moments of Pleasure’ she is asked to ‘call upon those she loves’ (RS), thus foregrounding the act of memorializing as a source of meditative love and power. Bush’s character is then seen floating in a pre-heavenly space as she remembers people who have left the mortal realm. This space acts as the indeterminate arena where contact and crossing can occur between worlds, as she is seen rotating, encircled by the people she remembers as they pass through and between realms. Amongst them is a reference to Bush’s mother, Hannah, who died during the making of the album:

And I can hear my mother saying  
 ‘Every old sock meets an old shoe’  
 isn’t that a great saying?  
 ‘Every old sock meets an old shoe’  
 Here come the hills of time (RS).

The heavy emphasis on the spiritual that pervades the works may have emerged as Bush’s response to the death of her mother at the time of the album’s release. It undoubtedly affected songs like ‘Big Stripey Lie’, one of her most powerful songs, which sonically

18 Christ CP (2004) *Rebirth of the Goddess: Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*. London: Routledge, 161.

19 Christ CP (2004) *Rebirth of the Goddess, Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*. London: Routledge, 161.

20 Fortune D (1974) *The Mystical Qabalah*. London: Ernest Benn, 29.

dramatizes drowning inside the incomprehensibility of grief: ‘Your name is being called by sacred things/ That are not addressed nor listened to/ Sometimes they blow trumpets’ (*RS*). If we remember that in the original tale of ‘The Red Shoes,’ Karen’s initial violation of wearing the shoes was seen as an inappropriate response to her mother’s death. Thus the red shoes tale seems a particularly suitable arena in which to explore the experience of grief and maternal mourning. Moreover, the spiritual universe of Bush’s *The Red Shoes* draws on Irish Catholic iconography, which is taken from her mother’s lineage.

The references throughout the album to the sacred heart are evocative of the Catholic iconography that centres upon the sacred heart of Jesus; a form of devotion predominantly used in the Catholic Church to represent the divine love for humanity. In this light, the song ‘Why Should I Love You’, which begins with the trio Bulgarka singing a religious-sounding arrangement that becomes an integral part of the soundscape, can be seen as an extended hymn of devotion to the iconography embodied by the sacred heart:

Have you ever seen a picture  
Of Jesus laughing?  
*Mmm*, do you think  
He had a beautiful smile?  
A smile that healed (*RS*, italics mine).

Bush’s use of ‘Mmm’ here evokes her previous use of the phrase in the 1989 song ‘The Sensual World’ which she took from Molly Bloom’s soliloquy in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Bush commented how she used the ‘Mmm’ in ‘The Sensual World’ to ‘express myself as a female in a female way and I found that original piece (Molly Bloom’s speech) very female talking.’<sup>21</sup> It is used again in this song to conjure the similar aspects of sensuality. Bush may, of course, be in danger of romanticizing a Catholic doctrine that harbours extremely conservative ideas about gender and sexuality. However, her exploration of the devotional imagery of Jesus in relation to ideas about love and healing is foundational for *The Red Shoes* as a whole, whilst also resonating with her own biography. Framing the devotional song with the question ‘Why Should I Love You?’ thus casts an enduring sense of hesitancy and ambiguity over the celebratory tones of the music.

However, Bush places her own particular emphasis on the religious images and ideas that brim with immanent and embodied feminine sensuality.

The red of the Sacred Heart  
The grey of a ghost  
The ‘L’ of the lips are open  
The ‘O’ of the Host  
The ‘V’ of the Velvet (*RS*).

Here there is an evocation of a specifically female divine presence regarding the open velvet lips that host the sacred heart as suggestive of the vagina, connecting it to love – the ‘E of my eye/ The eye of wonder’ (*RS*) – which articulates a positive perception of

21 Kate Bush quoted in Whiteley S (2006) *Too Much, Too Young: Popular Music, Age and Gender*. London: Routledge, 81.

the world, spirituality, body and soul. The fact that Bush merges the grey 'ghost' of the holy-spirit with suggestions of sexual openness provides a physical and spiritual map that runs counter to understandings of transcendent male iconography that splits the spirit from the body. Thus Bush establishes in the musical texts of *The Red Shoes* an embodied, divined sexuality, a knowledge that is omitted and suppressed within the dominant religions of patriarchal culture. She reconfigures and perverts traditional iconography, carving out space for affective, immanent, bodily-spiritual agency.

Constructing a genealogy of female-centred divinity is, for Luce Irigaray, an essential part of a culture that recognizes female sexual difference. This recognition of difference through divinity must be achieved before culture can move beyond dualistic, male-dominated frameworks into a society of radical sexual difference. According to Irigaray, this forms the starting point to move toward respect for multiple differences:

Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign. No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine. There comes a time for destruction, but before destruction is possible, Gods of the gods must exist [...] our theological tradition presents some difficulty as far as God in the feminine gender is concerned. There is no *woman* God, no female trinity: mother, daughter and spirit.<sup>22</sup>

Much of Bush's work as an artist is about asserting and making intelligible an experience of immanent feminine divinity within popular song and music video. She presents an ontology that celebrates the divinity of the female subject autonomous from patriarchal subjectivity that would place the woman in a dependent sexual, cultural and social relation to man. However, it is not until *The Red Shoes*, 15 years into her career, that the turn towards the divine is revisited most forcefully and consistently, creating a space where the immanent merging of flesh and spirit can be made intelligible. This return is a reminder that the embodied subject enables a questioning of ideas about god as understood in patriarchal cultures – the god who is able to transcend the earth and the body – and centres divinity immanently within this world and within bodies, as divinity forms the ground of all being.

Bush's work contributes toward debates concerning cultures of radical immanence, and implies that they are not about inserting universalized and prescribed behaviours for essential female bodies.<sup>23</sup> They *are* about creating a framework for culture where embodied, emotional and spiritual intelligence can flourish. This radically challenges the ontological habits of liberal humanist, capitalist hetero-patriarchy which denies and suppresses the body, the spirit and emotion, framing these vital forces as interferences in a supposedly superior model of the subject whose mind is split from its body, as objectivity and rationality are privileged and normalized. Bush's adventures in *The Red Shoes* are a contribution to breaking the symbolic spell of that system, as she offers a symbolic intervention that unites the rational and the irrational, the body and the

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22 Irigaray L (1982) *Sexes and Genealogies*. Trans. Gill GC; New York: Columbia University Press, 62.

23 Christ CP (2004) *Rebirth of the Goddess, Finding Meaning in Feminist Spirituality*. London: Routledge, 100.

spirit, within an experience of the divine that is of ‘this world’. This breaks with the prevalence of dualistic, binary understandings of the social, cultural and spiritual world and offers an alternative map where lives can be orientated through interrelated and immanent subjectivity.

In conclusion, *The Red Shoes* and *The Line, the Cross and the Curve* are constituted through reference to a vast range of magical, ritualistic, devotional and spiritual systems that are channelled to protect, heal, celebrate and memorialize the dead. They draw upon Irish mystical and familial ancestry as well as harnessing feminine divine power. To practitioners of ritual magick, Bush’s work on the album will undoubtedly resonate as clear evidence of her engagement with these systems of understanding. Depending on listeners’ level of sensitivity and knowledge of or involvement with such practices, will therefore impact upon how deeply the spiritual systems of both film and album resound within their audience.

Regardless of whether the audience possesses specialized knowledge or not, all of these factors combined serve to meld spirituality and love as essential qualities to harness in order to ensure survival within the confusing and sometimes incomprehensible map presented to the inhabitants of a mono-dimensional mortal state.

Steer your life by these stars  
 On the unconditional chance  
 ’Tis where hell and heaven dance  
 This is the constellation of the heart (*RS*).

Both film and album grapple with the distinction between material and spiritual worlds and life and death and consequently often refuse the separation. They display an interpenetration of these realms, blurring the boundaries and celebrating their crossing.

## Reclamation or Partial Intervention?

At purely linguistic, structural and symbolic levels, Bush’s occupation of the red shoes story carries with it important changes; but how many of the tale’s original structures remain intact? *The Line, the Cross and the Curve* suggests that women may never be released from the tyranny of the red shoes: they can only be passed like a baton onto other unfortunate, sinning subjects. The final scenes of Bush’s film dramatize her escape from the shoes, as she manages to successfully sing back the symbols and break the spell. Unfortunately, this is at the expense of the unnamed woman character who ‘tricked her’ into putting the shoes on in the first instance, since she is forced to put them on again. The final scene of the film depicts the red shoes writhing above the rubble, refusing to stay still on the legs of their previous owner. This suggests the power of the red shoes to endure the effects of time, space and multiple realities thus triumphing over Bush’s attempts to reduce their symbolic, mythological and narrative power over women’s bodies.

The two figures played by Miranda Richardson and Lindsey Kemp are the eternal characters in the story of ‘The Red Shoes’ – the shoemaker and the girl – and it seems the story cannot escape their sovereignty despite Bush’s attempt at reclamation. In this sense

Bush offers only a partial intervention into the story, as the only woman she can save is herself, sacrificing the other woman to a fate of endless punishing movement. This is a classically circumscribed liberation for women within patriarchal cultures, which can only be achieved at the expense of another woman.

Ultimately, our final impressions of these works are of the red shoes, indicated particularly by their occupation of the central space of the cover of the album, ensuring our understanding remains focussed on their symbolic power. They frame the texts with a promise that their significance will not be relinquished easily or without genuine structural change to the symbolic universe where the story has survived constant retellings for over 150 years. Consequently, the shoes and what they represent will continue to circulate within the popular imaginary despite Bush's efforts.

There is one final challenge that Bush's symbolism poses to the symbolic logic of the red shoes story, and these can be found in the closing scenes of *The Line, the Cross and the Curve*. The austere logic of Andersen's Christian morality tale in the film is suggested by the frozen landscape which Bush's character falls exhausted upon. Here she is confronted with the unnamed lady who tells her she has sing back the symbols – line, cross and curve – in order to break the spell. The pair then run through winter landscape into Autumn, singing the words to 'Eat the Music': 'split me open/ with devotion' (RS). Finally they run into the warmth of summer in a room full of exotic fruits – bananas, papayas, guavas and many more – where she is impelled to 'Eat the Music' in a final, ecstatic dance. This scene *should* be read for its dubious racial imagery which blatantly exoticizes blackness, as a room full of black bodies are surrounded by an abundance of fruit whose seeds, juices and flesh are bursting which in turn sexualizes them. Bush's position as the only white person in the room further accentuates this, while the music also runs close to cultural appropriation with its Latin American/ Madagascan rhythm and sound.

However, in the context of the codes within the film, blackness is associated with the warmth that melts the icy spell cast over Bush, as she undergoes a process of positive repossession of the 'shoes [that] do/ a kind of voodoo' (RS) that filters warmth and love into her body so that she can carry through to the fight in the final stages of the film. She is placed in the middle room as a shaman figure places his hand above Bush's head and forces it to move in hypnotic, circular motions. As Bush – complete with tribal red streaks brushed across her face – enters into a trance, the healer further shakes his hands around the energy fields her body, releasing the rhythms of its possession from her.

Finally the spell is broken as Bush's smile, heart and line (suggestive of pagan paths), fly back to her on the original pieces of paper, as the unnamed woman chases after them in vain. As she awakes the shoes are no longer on her feet and are returned to their original owner who hisses at Bush in anger and wrestles her to the ground. Thus, in the final scene, Bush aligns herself with the powers of blackness in a fruitful move that enables her to escape the spell cast by the cold, white, Christian morality tale. Despite the fact that Bush aligns herself and identifies with these powers, they are still equated with a kind of tribal primitivism which should be seen in a cautionary light. Within the symbolic codes that Bush deploys in the story, they underwrite the normative logic, and cold frigidity of whiteness, with the warm ushering forth a fluidity that creates greater flexibility and movement – symbolic, physical and spiritual.

## Conclusion

In Bush's *The Red Shoes* and *The Line, the Cross and the Curve* she deploys various form of occult, pagan or magickal practices in order to challenge the dominant symbolic logic of 'The Red Shoes' story. I have demonstrated how she deploys an immanent feminine spirituality that is devotional, sexual and transformative, that within the body of both album and film serve to challenge the morality tale formed in the context of misogynistic, nineteenth century bourgeois society. Bush takes the heretical behaviour of Karen *seriously*, and engages with suitably heretical counter-spirituality that melds Catholic iconography and Kabbalistic ritual in an attempted intervention into the red shoes story. Although ultimately she cannot overcome the symbolic power of 'The Red Shoes' as the film reinforces their sovereignty, she does make an intervention into the singly symbolic logic of the film, loosening and reworking its coordinates.

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