

Esther Sonnet  
University of Portsmouth

**Time-Ripened Talents : Stardom, Performativity and the Decline of Classical Hollywood in the British Aging Actress Cycle 1964-74**

This paper will explore the social, sexual and industrial significance of the appearances of aging Hollywood actresses in a cycle of British and Anglo-American film productions in the decade from 1964-74. For example: Miriam Hopkins in Fanny Hill (1964); Bette Davis in The Nanny (1965) and later in The Anniversary (1968); Talullah Bankhead in Die, Die, My Darling (1965) Joan Fontaine in The Witches (1966); Joan Crawford Berserk aka Circus of Blood (1967); Ava Gardner in Tam Lin (1971) and Lana Turner in Persecution (1973). The appearance of American actresses in British and Anglo-American productions at this time might firstly be explained by their falling star status; low-budget British productions provided a natural terminus for American actresses unable, because of declining sexual exchange value, to command prestigious contracts within an American film system of stardom dependent on the fetishization of feminine youth. Yet their appearance within British cinema production at this time is more ideologically complex than this would suggest: superannuated American actresses were employed within a range of British productions typified by some generic and narrative diversity, including Seven Arts/Hammer horror variants of the domestic or psycho thriller, the Grand Guignol serialmurder, familial melodrama, witchcraft/the supernatural and historical adaptation. Such apparent variety, however, obscures the larger *symbolic* use of the star histories and bodies of the ageing actresses that, from an ideological viewpoint, justifies treating them as a coherent corpus. The cycle provides compelling material to support the view that ageing actresses from Hollywood's studio system era functioned within British cinema during the 1964-76 period as symbolic markers of cultural, sexual and bodily *decline*. Within films defined by narratives of the loss of female sexual power, madness, social marginalisation and maternal/familial impotence, incestuous sexual rivalry, hostility to young women and perverted maternal instincts, the dislocation and relocation of classical Hollywood stars onto the commercial and ideological terrain of British productions of this period offers a vivid display of the aging female star/body as gender- and age-specific spectacle of decay.