



**A Packet of Olivier cigarettes and an advertisement for the brand (c.1956)  
By Jennifer Barnes**

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This item from the Bill Douglas Centre collections is a (full) packet of 'Olivier' brand cigarettes and an advertisement for the product.

In the 1950s Laurence Olivier's star image is marked by a tension between two different and apparently irreconcilable understandings of what constitutes British celebrity during the post-war period, a tension that is, in turn, indicative of wider relations between the post-war British and American film industries. Specifically, Olivier is imagined as oscillating between two different modes of stardom: the theatrical and the cinematic. The theatrical is defined as representative of the prestige and heritage of the nation while the cinematic suggests a Hollywood-influenced commodification of the star image that is seen as incompatible with theatrical (and explicitly British) star discourses.

The Olivier cigarettes, enable me to focus and clarify my research by outlining my argument in relation to a contemporary object that directly cites the tensions that I am exploring. The Olivier cigarettes were a brand initiated in 1956 after the success of Oliver's film version of *Richard III* and are themselves indelibly marked by the conflict that characterises Olivier's star image in the early 1950s. Representing a saleable commodity that trades on the Olivier name, the cigarette packaging also evokes the national prestige associated with their namesake. Thus, the white and blue suggests the colours of the Royal Navy uniform that Olivier himself had worn during the war, while the golden imprint of the coat of arms explicitly asserts Olivier's connection to the nation and its heritage as a cipher for "Shakespeare" and knight of the realm.

Advertisements for the cigarettes cite key words associated with Olivier's star image: "cool", "smooth", "elegant", "quality"; but the Hollywood-style co modification that the cigarettes ultimately suggest is imagined as incompatible with Olivier's status as a national icon. An outraged Lieutenant Colonel CJ Barton-Innes of Kensington wrote to Olivier in 1956, declaring that it is "inconceivable that one who had received the honour of a knighthood from his sovereign could so besmirch the dignity conferred upon him as to sell his name for such an ignominious purpose as to boost a brand of cigarettes".