



# **Roles of Authority: Thespian Biography and Celebrity in Eighteenth-Century Britain**

*Cheryl Wanko*

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Celebrity biographies, with their stories of scandal, never fail to titillate. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find record of the best-seller list they didn't punctuate. But delving into professional struggles, private torments, and sexual escapades of performing artists has a long and unexplored history. Eighteenth-century Britain had its own tradition of celebrity biographies and autobiographies. In fact, the genre began in English in 1695, with the story of Matthew Coppinger, a little-known actor who wrote verses, engaged in pretty crime, and ended his life on the gallows. *Roles of Authority* provides the first comprehensive study of the earliest hundred years of celebrity biography in English, from actor-thief Coppinger to the superstars David Garrick and Sarah Siddons. Of interest to historians of theater and popular culture alike, *Roles of Authority* shows the ways in which these emerging public figures entered into other disclosures of authority during the eighteenth century. By engaging with traditional and contemporary learning, medical legitimacy, gender hierarchies, literary authority, paternalistic family structure, and financial power, writings about stage performers gained them cultural status and social acceptance. As traditional forms of authority transmuted in a culture shifting from a more centralized patronage-related financial and artistic system to one driven by commercialism and market capitalism, cultural spaces for new types of authorities appeared. Alternately condemned and acclaimed, performers epitomized this new cultural space in which high and low, fame and notoriety, respectability and eccentricity combined. Wanko's careful study defines how biographies gave birth not only to these new cultural heroes but also to an enduring cash cow that has since thrived in all economies.

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