

## **ABSTRACT**

Medical Practice, Medical Performance: Mountebanks in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England

My dissertation project, “Medical Practice, Medical Performance: Mountebanks in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England,” takes as its central focus the figure of the early modern “mountebank,” understood in this context as an untrained, unqualified, untrustworthy doctor-peddler known for hawking his wares on stages in crowded city squares and piazzas across Europe. The nature of the mountebank’s boasts to cure all ills for extremely cheap prices—all set within an elaborate staged spectacle that could involve pulling patients’ teeth, handling snakes, singing songs, and acting out plays—makes the figure at once a fascinating oddity and a critical problem. Namely, scholars of medical history have struggled to fit the mountebank into a clear category of medical practice like that of the physician, the surgeon, and the apothecary. Rather, the mountebank as a figure has remained as slippery in definition as his infamously cunning speech. This dissertation project seeks to reevaluate and characterize the mountebank at length in terms of the way the figure interacts, both historically and literarily, with the contexts of the medical market operating within sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. Each chapter of the dissertation will therefore examine mountebanks’ speeches, portrayals, and public condemnations in light of key medical concerns like medicinal composition, the treatment of sexual disorders, and surgery. In addition, the project will dissect the rhetorical moves by which mountebanks lured, ensnared, and at times deceived their audiences; the project will then connect these rhetorical methods to modern attempts to ‘sell’ medical wares in other, non-staged formats, including print advertisements, commercials, and television shows. The dissertation will thus allow readers to determine not only what a mountebank has been in the historical past, but what he may be now.