“The aim of a liberal education is to unsettle presumptions, to de-familiarize the familiar, to reveal what is going on beneath and behind appearances, to disorient young people and to help them to find ways to reorient themselves” (Harvard Faculty Committee Report).

**Course Description**

“Madness and Melancholy” rests on the assumption that definitions of madness and melancholy are, in Roy Porter’s words, “not fixed points but culture-relative.” While we will read some contemporary discussions of how depression and other mental disorders are treated and defined, the bulk of our reading will consist of literary, medical, and philosophical accounts of madness and melancholy written from the classical period to the early seventeenth-century. Our reading will be comparative and we will seek to understand each account of madness and/or melancholy in the context in which it was written. Instead of agreement, we will find, in every period, debate and disagreement about how madness and melancholy should be defined and treated.

While depression and madness are now typically medicalized and pathologized, in other periods, writers, scientists included, took an approach to melancholy and madness that was as much, or more, religious, ethical, or philosophical as it was medical. We will see madness and melancholy sometimes judged positively rather than negatively. We will read writers defining madness and melancholy in relation to the bodily humors, to gender, genius, the gods or God, love, parents, power, the planets, reason, and sin. More often than not, these same writers are more concerned with what it means to be good than they are concerned with what it means to be well. Frequently, the writers we read are critical of the societies in which they live and of most of the people in those societies, including those who are wealthy and have power. The class, then, has less to say about contemporary views of psychology or medicine than it does about religion, moral philosophy, and the social and political implications of madness and melancholy in eras earlier than our own.

**READING**

Plato, *Phaedrus* (Hackett).

Excerpts or essays at Oncourse or on the web from work by the following writers: [Pseudo] Aristotle, Erasmus, Marsilio Ficino, Galen, Hildegard of Bingen, Hippocrates, Ruth Padel, [Pseudo] Hippocrates, and Seneca. Entries from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5)*, “The bright side of being blue: Depression as an adaptation for analyzing complex problems” by Paul W. Andrews and J. Anderson Thomson, Jr., comments on that essay by Ed Coyne and Jerry Hagen, essays by Jonah Lehrer and Louis Menand, and essays that illustrate the debate about the content of *DSM V*. 