"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, genetics, 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 live the good life 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 has less to say, then, about psychology or medicine than it does about religion, moral philosophy, and the social and political implications of madness and melancholy.

NOTE: Before you enroll in the class, you should be aware that every semester some students find some of the work we read difficult to comprehend and interpret. You should also be aware that I place a great deal of emphasis on the quality of student writing. While it is perfectly possible to get an A in the class, you have to write well to earn it.

READING
Plato, Phaedrus (Hackett).
Kay Redfield Jamison, An Unquiet Mind.
Shakespeare, King Lear (Arden).

Excerpts on E-Reserve or on the web from work by the following writers: essays by and excerpts from: [Pseudo] Aristotle, Robert Burton, Erasmus, Marsilio Ficino, Galen, Hildegard of Bingen,
Hippocrates, Ruth Padel, [Pseudo] Hippocrates, and Seneca; the following selection of work that illustrates issues central to the contemporary debate about the diagnosis and treatment of depression: entries from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV), “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 a debate between Christopher Lane and Nassir Ghaemi about, among other topics, the present and the future of DSM IV.

Assignments
Three six to eight page essays. 80% of final grade. A library exercise that will test your ability to find material in IUCAT and a variety of subject-specific online databases. 10% of final grade. Participation in class discussion and in-class activities. 10% of final grade.

Books are available at Boxcar Books, 408 E. Sixth Street, Bloomington, IN 47408.