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Mad times

The *Madness* is a very straightforwardly structured novel: it covers Serrallonga's decline in chronological sequence. The friends who analyse Serrallonga (as if he were a lab rat) have three approaches. The nameless narrator is kindly, though ineffective; Armengol is mocking; and the medical student Giberga gives a more distant, scientific view. Then, two kinds of madness are posited: inherited, biological madness and madness caused by difficult circumstances. And Oller implies a third: perhaps the three friends who, unlike Serrallonga, adapt comfortably to a mad world are not so sane, either.

The novel opens in Barcelona in 1867 and focuses on the narrator's occasional meetings with the wealthy landowner, Serrallonga, and on news and gossip about him over the next 16 years. We learn at the first meeting in a café that Serrallonga, pipe gripped in teeth, eyes that roll back in their sockets when he listens or thinks, shabbily dressed, is eccentric and passionate. He is someone you don't forget – and the driving-force of the novel is that Oller makes readers want to follow Serrallonga's story. Haven't most of us met a Serrallonga – the slightly older bohemian (he is 25; Armengol and the narrator are law students) who overawes us because he seems to have lived more, know more and, so much bolder, care not a jot what people think?

So, who's mad?

Serrallonga causes a political rumpus in the café and is arrested. While he is in jail, Armengol plays a dirty trick on him, pretending his anti-government articles have been published when they haven't. The narrator does not like the deceit, but spinelessly goes along with it. The reader next hears of Serrallonga through the medical student Giberga, who describes Serrallonga's unfortunate family to the two friends in another café. Madness in the family means, Giberga believes, that Serrallonga is "a marked man", marked by an injury to the brain. He has inherited madness.

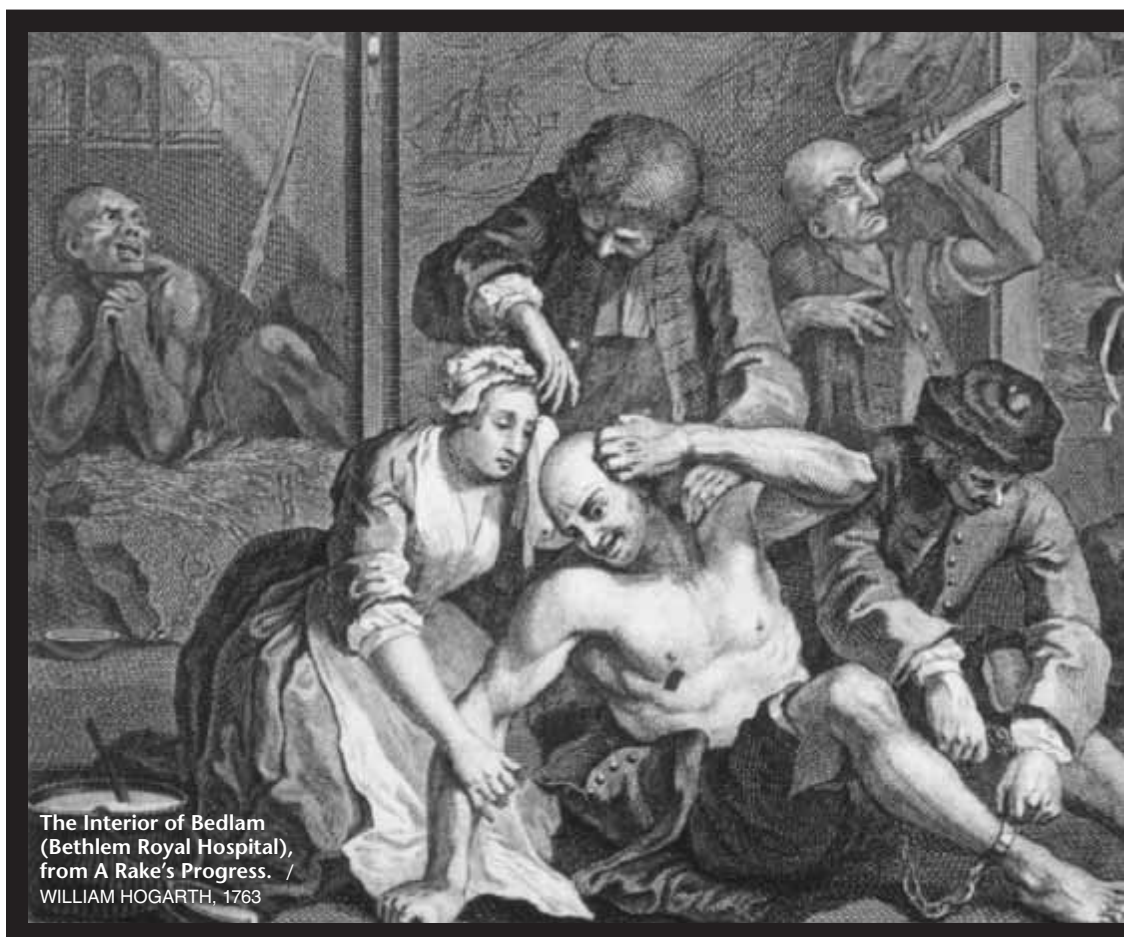
This is the notorious 'naturalism' of the nineteenth-century French writer Émile Zola: that our destinies are preordained by both blood (genes, we would

No doubt at all what this novel's about! From start to end, three friends, the rather dull narrator, the cynical charmer Armengol and the medical student Giberga investigate the **eccentric behaviour, then madness, then total mental collapse** of their acquaintance Daniel Serrallonga

say now) and circumstance, but with no room for personal choice. Zola's novels sought to show social reality by means of detailed descriptions of places and people seen only from the outside. Though Oller is often cited as the Catalan Zola, this is too facile a label. The *Madness* contains a lot of psychological insight into the characters' motives. Nor is Oller writing gloomy novels of predestined failure. Indeed, when Giberga expounds this theory of inherited insanity, Armengol laughingly shouts "What madness! You need to take a long, hard look at your-

self." (p.45) What and who is mad is not always so crystal clear.

Some years later, the narrator visits Serrallonga's village and meets his crazy sisters. The suicide of Serrallonga's father and the two sisters' behaviour are evidence of mental disorder in the family. The narrator learns that Serrallonga has become a member of parliament in Madrid, but does not dare to speak. Then his political hero Prim is assassinated, which plunges Serrallonga into gloom. He takes to his bed for three days, before with obsessive energy insisting to every-



The Interior of Bedlam (Bethlem Royal Hospital), from *A Rake's Progress*. / WILLIAM HOGARTH, 1763