

AN EXPERIMENT IN LEISURE

Marion Milner

Introduction by Maud Ellman

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First published in 1937 under the pseudonym of Joanna Field, Marion Milner's *An Experiment in Leisure* has been republished in a new edition with an illuminating introduction by Maud Ellman. As Ellman explains, Milner's aim was to use memory to answer Freud's notorious question: 'what does a woman want?' and in doing so she makes herself the subject, rather than the object of this question and her own musings.

In using memory, rather than written diary or journal entries Milner produces a work which is intensely autobiographical without being an autobiography, but which nevertheless reflects the importance of autobiographical writing in the first half of the twentieth century.

For Warner enthusiasts the primary interest in *An Experiment in Leisure* is two-fold. The first is Milner's idea that each person 'must for himself live through all the stages of the history of the gods' (p.70) to achieve inner freedom, and this finds interesting parallels with Warner's re-use of the gods in *The True Heart* (1929).

Related to this is the interest in witchcraft shared by Milner and Warner. In particular Milner's belief that in witchcraft 'the god they worshipped was not really a personification of evil but the best symbol they knew for the forces of life' (p.21) resonates strongly with Warner's *Lolly Willowes* (1926), which Milner read only after writing *An Experiment in Leisure*. Milner's argument that education had done little to teach her to know what she really wanted but a great deal to lead her into 'accepting what people wanted while making believe it was my own wish' is directly applicable to Lolly herself who found that a pact with the devil allowed her 'to be what [she] need[ed] to be' (p.152 and *n*).

Another of Milner's major concerns is the exploration of the myth of the self-sacrificing god as a key to understanding the processes of creativity. This gives rise to one of the weaknesses of *An Experiment in Leisure*, for by ignoring her predecessors in the field (including Freud) Milner often gives the impression of 'reinventing the wheel' (p.xix) as both Ellman and she (p.xlv) concede, ultimately detracting from the originality of the experiment in general. This repetition of previously known ideas or truths, together with the unrelenting interiority of the text, induce in the reader a sense not so much of watching the reinvention of the wheel but of becoming a hamster *in* a wheel: there is no escape.

Helen Sutherland