

## Ignorant is Bliss?

Sir Arthur Bliss' *Morning Heroes*, "a symphony for orator, chorus and orchestra" published in 1930, sets eclectic texts. Prominent are two passages from the *Iliad* (Books 6 and 19), by radically different hands (Walter Leaf [1882] and George Chapman [1611]), as well as a catalogue of heroes created by Bliss himself. The music speaks for itself, but the texts do not. On the contrary, they raise questions: what guided his choice of Homeric texts to set? Can we detect reasons why he abridged the passages as he did? Why did use two such divergent translations? What criteria determined which heroes made the catalogue, and which ones did not? (Menelaus, e.g., does not rate a mention.)

This paper will meditate upon these questions and propose some answers, with particular attention directed to the first two. More specifically, I shall suggest that the redacted text, far from reflecting 'Blissful' ignorance, actually reveals a composer who was a thoughtful and sensitive reader of the poem; by cleverly and judiciously abridging the text, Bliss achieved goals personal no less than artistic. Bliss belonged to the generation decimated and scarred by the Great War; though he survived the conflict, he suffered for nearly a decade from what we now know as post-traumatic stress disorder, manifested by recurrent nightmares. In seeking catharsis he turned both to music and to poetry about war, not least the *Iliad*. I shall argue for the following points: (1) the setting of text from *Iliad* 6 illuminates for us, even as it ameliorated for him, the trauma incurred during the War; (2) his handling of that text demonstrates an appreciation not only of Leaf's translation, but also of Homer's Greek; and (3) Bliss came by his acquaintance of, and sensitivity to, Homer's epic honestly, given his educational background.

I shall also address, albeit more briefly, what attracted Bliss to the passage from *Iliad* 18, and to Chapman's translation thereof. Lastly, I shall offer observations about what we are to make of

the curious catalogue of heroes, which includes Achaeans and Trojans alike, famous, obscure-- and spurious!

In sum, I shall present a fascinating instance of Homeric reception, whereby one bard of war enabled another, at a remove of more than two millennia, to come to grips with his own experience of “man-slaughtering Ares.”