

BBC
RADIO



Downloaded from www.bbc.co.uk/radio4

THE ATTACHED TRANSCRIPT WAS TYPED FROM A RECORDING AND NOT COPIED FROM AN ORIGINAL SCRIPT. BECAUSE OF THE RISK OF MISHEARING AND THE DIFFICULTY IN SOME CASES OF IDENTIFYING INDIVIDUAL SPEAKERS, THE BBC CANNOT VOUCH FOR ITS COMPLETE ACCURACY.

THE BBC REITH LECTURES – ADAPTATION

TX: 11.07.2017 09:00-09:45

PRESENTER: SUE LAWLEY

PRODUCER: JIM FRANK

LECTURE 5 - STRATFORD-ON-AVON

[APPLAUSE]

SUE LAWLEY: Hello and welcome to the last of the Reith Lecture with the novelist Hilary Mantel. We're at the Arts House in Stratford-on-Avon, a venue for music, theatre and dance in the centre of this historic town, the birthplace of William Shakespeare. Hilary's title for her lecture series is 'Resurrection, the Art and the Craft.' Resurrecting the dead is arguably, of course, what Shakespeare did with his history plays from King John to Henry VIII, 200 years of royal power struggles. Those plays, of course, are works of Shakespeare's imagination based fairly loosely on the historical figures themselves. Nevertheless, says Hilary Mantel, historical fiction whether a novel, a play or a film brings the dead to life. It resurrects them.

Her books about the Court of Henry VIII, *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up The Bodies*, have been phenomenally successful. Both won the Booker Prize for fiction. Both have been adapted successfully for television by the BBC, and for the stage by the Royal Shakespeare Company.

In this final lecture, she'll explain how that process works.

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the BBC Reith Lecturer for 2017, Hilary Mantel.

[APPLAUSE]

HILARY MANTEL: In the stage play of my novel *Wolf Hall*, Thomas Cromwell wants the young nobleman Harry Percy to take an oath to declare that he is not now, and never has been, secretly married to Anne Boleyn. But Harry Percy thinks they *are* married. He protests, ‘You can’t change the past.’

‘Oh,’ says Cromwell, ‘the past changes all the time, Harry. And I’m going to show you how easily it can be altered.’

He then grabs the young man and bangs his head on the table, as if to knock out his old memories and make space for new.

We all used to look forward to this scene, except the actor who played Harry Percy. Until this point, Cromwell had been an entirely reasonable man.

In the original novel, that scene is more complex. Cromwell persuades the earl that he must do as he’s told, because Cromwell represents the force of the future - and Harry Percy is a member of an economically illiterate warrior class whose day is over. Swept away on a flood of words, concussed by metaphorical rocks, the young man gives way.

Why the difference? The theatre craves action – but it’s not just that. The novel craves it too. But the hardest thing to put on the page is something that happens suddenly. The theatre is superb at surprise. It offers us thought condensed into action, just as the cinema does: it also takes an image and springs it open, so something powerful and unexpected jumps out. It puts the dead back into circulation, within touching distance.

When half-forgotten names are spoken – the names of real people, who happen to be dead - they shiver in the air of the auditorium, resonating in time and space. It makes me ask, is it enough to commemorate the dead by carving their names in stone? Or should we go into an arena and shout them out loud?

In these lectures I’ve argued that fiction, if well written, doesn’t betray history, but opens up its essential nature to inspection. When fiction is turned into theatre, or into a film or TV, the same applies: there is no necessary treason. Each way of telling, each medium for telling, draws a different potential from the original. Adaptation, done well, is not a secondary process, a set of grudging compromises - but an act of creation in itself.

Indeed, the work of adaptation is happening every day; without it, we couldn’t understand the past at all. An event occurs once: everything else is reiteration, a performance. When action is captured on film, it seems we have certainty about what happened. We can freeze the moment. Repeat it. But in fact, reality has already been framed. What’s out of shot is lost to us. In the very act of observing and recording, a gap has opened between the event and its transcription. Every night as you watch the news, you can see *story* forming up. The repetitious gabble of the reporter on the spot is soon smoothed to a studio version. The unmediated account is edited into coherence. Cause

and effect are demonstrated by the way we order our account. It gathers a subjective human dimension as it is analysed, discussed. We shovel meaning into it. The raw event is now processed. It is adapted into history.

Most of us spend our lives in adaptation, aware we have a secret self, and aware that it won't do. We send out a persona to represent us, to deal for us in public; there are two of us, one home and one away, one original and one adapted.

Now technology has multiplied ways to play with our identities. In on-line games, we can choose an avatar. We can proliferate, untied from physical limitation. Reality TV sets up scenes in which people mimic their real lives – but trimmed to a tidier pattern, and with a neater script. Watching them fumble to imitate themselves, we say, 'Ah, but they're not *real* actors.' Television and the theatre pick up a fact-based story before it's cold, and dramatize it. The living being and her impersonator can share a space. In Shakespeare's day, they didn't put the current monarch on stage. But our present queen can view herself adapted into different bodies, on stage, on TV, in the cinema.

Meanwhile her humble subjects must make do with faking themselves, photographing their own faces, then adapting the result till they have a self they like better. Its surprising novelists stay in the business, with so many keen amateurs in the lying game.

We writers console ourselves. We say, the media consume stories so fast that demand is always greater than supply. Everything starts with us, we say, sitting in a room: solitary, day-dreaming, scratching away like a monk. We could adapt, we say, if the Middle Ages came back. A paper and pen will do to conjure a world. Our imagination, we say, needs no power supply.

But really, we wish we had a camera and a crew. In ten seconds, the screen can show nuances of character or plot developments that in a novel, or on stage, would be impossible to depict. The cinema has a wonderful easy power to tell us where to look: this is your hero, the man the camera is following.

There is a difficulty for a novelist who writes about what we used to call 'great men': we want to keep the greatness, while making them human.

You don't want to cut them down to size in a spiteful modern way – even if you don't admire them, you have to recognize that an individual *plus* a reputation is more than just a private person – he or she is owned by everyone.

So on stage – and on the page - there is a nervous moment, before you bring in the big character – as it might be, Henry VIII, or Marilyn Monroe. The expectation of the audience is vast - can the actor live up to it?

On film, there need be no make-or-break moment. The problematic body can swim out of the background, as if from a psychic veil, a mist: or the viewer can take it in bit by bit - a spur, or a stiletto heel. We don't need a lookalike. The cinema creates a mythic identity. We watch a film all together, in the dark. We engage in collective dreaming. And we eat – we eat with our fingers, cheap, gratifying, baby food – as if suspending adult life and adult judgement, sinking entirely into the story we are told. The image has taken reason prisoner.

And then we come out into the street and are angry with ourselves, for believing what we see. The cinema is excellent at verisimilitude but less good with the truth. Time's the enemy. There's a limit to how many complex events you can digest into the average length of a feature film. It is a rare gift, to be able to find images to carry facts. We have explanatory devices - voice-overs, captions; they can add creative value, or they can be desperate measures which regress to the text. I think that what the adaptor must do is set aside the source – whether it's a history book or a novel - put down the text, and dream it. If you dream it, you might get it right, the spirit if not the letter; but if you are literal, you will set yourself up for failure.

Mostly, as I take it, film-makers don't set out to lie. Draft One may tell the truth: but a casual rewrite, in a series of rewrites by different hands, can shake out the truth and shake in a lie. As an audience, we recognize that film has the tools to do a really bad job. So a whole industry has grown up, of resistance: an industry of carping and picking holes.

We need the pedants and the complainers, to drive us back to the sources, and to open debate about what people call 'real history', and how it is sold to us. But it's a mistake to focus on trivialities. The people who demand total accuracy usually do it from a position of ignorance. To satisfy them would mean too much destruction. It would be vandalism to dig up a 21st century garden, so you only show 16th century plants. You can make a literal reproduction of an eighteenth-century chair but doesn't bring an eighteenth-century person to sit on it.

Not that accuracy is to be discouraged. A faithful representation is one that is stabilized by physical reality. In portraits of great women of the sixteenth century, they have a characteristic way of standing: head up, back straight, hands folded at the waist. Put a modern woman into a replica of that costume, properly weighted, and she can't stand any other way. Reality has a coercive force. The body adapts, and the body underneath matters as much as the clothes on top. It's the same with dialogue. Pastiche is not creative. We don't need our characters to mouth the words of another century, but to possess the common knowledge of their era - so they don't *say* what they could never think.

Compared to viewers 30 years ago, we are swift and sophisticated consumers of narrative. We have seen so many stories on the screen, and eaten them so fast with our gaze. Television can make our familiar world hyper-real, lying to us that no camera is present. But we wished to be undeceived - so we evolved the mock-documentary, which makes fun of its own workings. The actors flick a furtive glance at the camera, mimicking the embarrassment of a real person, caught in the nefarious act of going about their day. It may be because we are used to this ironical mode – realism smirking at itself – that the dramatic reconstructions inserted into history programmes now look so earnest and clumsy. We can see its low budget impersonation, and we refuse to suspend belief.

In the theatre we seldom refuse, as long as the events we're shown have emotional truth. Schiller's play *Maria Stuart*, first produced in 1800, sets up a meeting between Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I. In real life, these rival queens never met. But we recognize the dramatic need to put them in the same place: after all, they must have met in the space within their heads. They probably dreamed of each other, and the playwright joins us to the dream. The theatre allows us to be complicit in deception,

without feeling guilt – because it doesn't disguise its artificiality. As with the cinema, we wait till the lights go down, then abdicate from our stubborn literal selves.

History is always trying to show itself to us. In the western tradition, drama was a mature art when the novel was still young. We have built theatres for centuries - special buildings for the specific purpose of repeating human experience with small variations. In these buildings, day by day, everything is the same but not the same.

To adapt a history for the stage you must make time and space, obey *your* laws. If you are working from a novel, that fiction becomes the canonical text, standing in for history. The novelist has some advantages. His stage sets are built out of black marks on white paper. On the page, a cast of a hundred is as cheap as a cast of two. For the stage, the adaptor must reduce the personnel, for practical as well as artistic reasons. Cut down the number of characters and you must adapt the story, reorganize events so that one person stands in for another.

It takes skill to manage that shift so you are still telling the truth – though not the literal truth. All we have is what Shakespeare calls, 'the 2 hours traffic of our stage.' However gripping the action, it's a sad truth that an audience gets restless at ten o'clock. They might crave to see the wedding or the execution, then the curtain call. But they don't want to miss their train, or go home on the night bus with the drunks.

Each art form works when it plays to its strengths, or at least, understands its weaknesses. The screenwriter knows his director can populate a city, or whistle up a mob using computer-generated imagery. The playwright's mob is too meagre to be scary. His battle scene suffers because he only has four combatants and some clattery shields. It's tough if your story ends in a battle. But then, look at the climax of *Richard III*. No one forgets Richard yelling out his big offer: 'My kingdom for a horse.' But no-one is going to bring him a horse, because the real and chilling end to his story has already happened in the tent on the eve of battle, when the souls of the dead gather to tell him that the game's up. 'The lights burn blue; it is now dead midnight.' Their intimate whisper is more final than the force of arms.

There *is* a way around the practical constraints – it is to use *words* as arrows that go straight to the heart of an audience. A stage play is a brilliant vehicle for the past, because it is a hazardous, unstable form, enacting history as it was made – breath by breath. The script sets parameters – this time, this place, this body. But the actor is not a repetition machine. Every show is different. History becomes interactive. Without speaking – by clapping, by sighing, by laughter, or by silence – and there are different kinds of silence – the audience directs the show, subtly adjusting the rhythm and nuance of what they see. The barrier that protects the actor is invisible, held in place only by the imagination of the onlookers. Reality can't be censored out. Sirens from the street cut through the mutter of Roman conspiracy, as if someone had anticipated Caesar's assassination and sent for an ambulance. In the Schiller drama I mentioned, *Maria Stuart*, there is an invented character who, towards the end of the play, stabs himself. In 2008 in Vienna, the play's audience were aghast at the rush of blood – it seemed so impressively real. It was. By some backstage muddle - by error, not malice – the stage knife had been replaced by a real knife.

Next day, the actor was back on stage, patched up. Living and dead in the theatre, we are not safe from each other. In *King Lear*, art brings a man to the edge of a

cliff. Outcast, the blinded Duke of Gloucester comes, as he believes, to Dover, stumbling towards death. He thinks he has arrived the edge of England. He launches himself into the empty air.

We, the audience, can see there is no cliff. The blind man is standing on solid ground. It's a trick *adapted* from low comedy, from farce – an old fool reacting to an imaginary peril. But then the truth comes home to us, in a pulse-beat: and not just the truth about the blind duke. The cliff is invisible, but real. That's where we all live, one inch, one heartbeat, from extinction. It's not a few seconds we spend there, it's our whole lives.

King Lear is not history, it's myth; but it tells profound truths about the workings of power and love. It does the artist's work of turning history inside out and telling us what's under the skin. Despite what Marx said, I don't believe history ever repeats itself, either as tragedy or farce. I think it's a live show and you get one chance. Blink and you miss it. Only through art can you live it again.

And without art, what have you, to inform you about the past? What lies beyond is the unedited flicker of closed-circuit TV. This technology offers to capture the world without bias, without interpretation. The pictures help us count heads in a crowd. They can help us nail a lie, or spot a wanted man. Yet the images from the mechanical eye have a peculiar chill, because they show us helpless against fate – parched automatons, occupying space without commanding it. Think of those pictures of Diana, 20 years ago, leaving the Paris Ritz through the service corridor – her retreating back, only minutes before her death. To these images you are history's lonely, appalled witness, the eternal bystander. No creative hand is at work – just life, mutely and stupidly recorded, shown to us when it's too late to act, too late to learn.

If we told our histories in that mode we would despair. Though the images of Diana are banal, artless, that still doesn't guarantee their perfect truth. The inquest heard that they came from five banks of cameras that were not quite synchronized: so on that most unlucky night, there were five different time zones on offer in the Ritz Hotel.

Death is certain, the hour of death uncertain, and our precise position on our path towards it is not, even in retrospect, as easy to pinpoint as you would think. If we crave truth unmediated by art we are chasing a phantom. We need the commentator's craft, even to make sense of the news. We need historians, not to collect facts, but to help us pick a path through the facts, to meaning. We need fiction to remind us that the unknown and unknowable is real, and exerts its force.

Some writers and adaptors disclaim responsibility. They say the public wants escapism - so let's give them what they want. They cheat their audience as politicians cheat when they make uncoded pledges: the bill comes later, when we lose a grip on our own story, and fall into individual distress and political incoherence.

I have written a novel called *The Giant, O'Brien*, loosely based on the true story of a real-life giant who came to London in the 1780s, to exhibit himself for money. In my version, the giant is more than a freakishly tall man: he is the embodiment and carrier of myth, and he has a fund of stories about love and war and talking animals and saints. His followers join in, shouting up with jokes and plot twists of their own. He tries to incorporate them and keep everybody happy.

So his stories are interactive, democratic and popular – the only trouble is, they are corrupt. They get further and further from the story as he knows it to be. In the end, he realizes the folly of telling people what they want to hear. He says, ‘Stories cannot save us... Unless we plead on our knees with history we are done for, we are lost.’

History, of course, hears no plea: it is a human being who hears, the bearer of the tale. The giant’s plea is for art and craft honestly deployed. Our audiences do not need to be protected from stories; they know when they enter the fictional space.

But we owe it to them to stretch our technique to offer the truth, in its multiple and layered forms - not to mislead because it is, on the face of it, the easier option – we should not avoid the complexities and contradictions of history, any more than politicians should abandon debate and govern by slogans. We must try by all the means we command to do justice to the past in its nuance, intricacy, familiarity and strangeness. Historical fiction acts to make the past a shared imaginative resource. It is more than a project of preservation: it is a project against death. In the epigraph to my novel about the Irish giant, I quoted the poet George MacBeth, and I leave you with his thought about what we want from the past and how we get it:

All crib from skulls and bones
Who push the pen.
Readers crave bodies:
We’re the resurrection men.

[APPLAUSE]

SUE LAWLEY: Many thanks, Hilary. I’m going to ask for questions from our audience here in Stratford now, but before I do, I just wanted to ask you about any relationship you might have had with the RSC - the Royal Shakespeare Company - before you set out on this great venture with them. When did you first come here? Did you come to the theatre here?

HILARY MANTEL: Yes I first came to Stratford when I was 16 with two friends from school. We came and in three days we saw four plays, and I just thought, well I want to live here.

SUE LAWLEY: But little did you know what a large part it was going to play in your life.

HILARY MANTEL: I think I sort of did, in a way.

SUE LAWLEY: Did you?

HILARY MANTEL: Yes. I loved Shakespeare and I began reading Shakespeare very early, and I knew it was very important to me but I don’t understand why I didn’t elect to study it because I could very happily have spent my life that way. But I think it was only when I came to Stratford on that trip that I realized that there were people who spent their whole lives studying Shakespeare.

SUE LAWLEY: Instead of which you read Law, I think. I'm going to take some questions from the floor.

Q: My name is **Mehr**. I'm a 17-year-old student at the Joseph Chamberlain Sixth Form College, Birmingham. My question is when creating historical fiction, who has the greatest ability to shape, because we're playing of existence to raise the dead, the author of a book, director on stage or an actor?

SUE LAWLEY: Who has the control? The writer, the director, the actor?

HILARY MANTEL: I think that's a very interesting question but I don't think there's one simple answer to it. I think that to succeed you have to have a synergy. You have to have everyone bringing and fusing their instincts and their intellect. It's very much a matter of reconnecting physically with the people in history which the actor does for us superbly aided and abetted by those other people. I really think teamwork is the key.

SUE LAWLEY: But it's a pooled resource, isn't it, this character.

HILARY MANTEL: I think so. And I----

SUE LAWLEY: Can you let go? I just remember back in Antwerp you were talking about a young woman who couldn't let go. I mean at some point somebody might say "Do you know what? He wouldn't say that. He'd say this." And you've got to lose control.

HILARY MANTEL: I think control is a bad way to think of it actually, because once you enter into any kind of artistic project...the battle in a way is to lose control. It's to yield control creatively. And open yourself to the input of a writer...as a writer to the input of your own unconscious mind. And if you're working in a team to open yourself to people who will come with a very different view of aims and means.

SUE LAWLEY: I've got a questioner here...

Q: **Zoe Donegan**, Producer, Royal Shakespeare Company. You mentioned that different mediums draw a different potential from the original. Conversely, in what ways have the television and theatre adaptations of *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up The Bodies* influenced your writing of the next Cromwell book?

HILARY MANTEL: When I get stuck now, and I think this is too complex and I will never, ever get this point over to the reader, I say hang on, we did the whole Reformation in two pages. And we did not tell a lie, and there were jokes in it. So when I say to myself well if that was possible, this must be possible. And now, I just sit down and story board it, and I...

SUE LAWLEY: And you didn't do that before?

HILARY MANTEL: No, I didn't do that before. I've now got a whole set of new tools or weapons or however you like to regard these techniques, and they are practical and they work. And all that is thanks to the collaboration on the stage plays and my lesser involvement but still very happy involvement in the TV version.

SUE LAWLEY: And we'll come to a question at the back there...

Q: Paul Edmondson, Head of Research, The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. Stratford-upon-Avon has for many years adapted and continues to adapt Shakespeare's life. How would you as a novelist portray Shakespeare's life? How would you dream it?

HILARY MANTEL: People haven't had a lot of success with it, have they? I think, no I was talking about that fear when the big man or woman walks in. Just imagine if that person is really Shakespeare, what are you going to make him say? Anthony Burgess did quite a good job, though he did a better job on the lesser figure of Christopher Marlowe. Sometimes you are safer to go with the same team. I find that sometimes, when writers are put on the page, even lesser writers than Shakespeare, poets, playwrights, I feel my toes curling as I read. And I don't know why but everything in me as a writer is crying, "Danger, danger." You may be out of your league here.

SUE LAWLEY: Do you want to come back on that?

Paul Edmondson: How would you portray Shakespeare's life? How would you dream it?

HILARY MANTEL: I consider that his plays have done the job for us, and I would leave it there.

[APPLAUSE]

SUE LAWLEY: Now on the front row here, we have Peter Kosminsky, who directed the television adaptations of *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up The Bodies*. Famously Peter, and somewhat controversially, you lit them – because we were talking about lighting – by candlelight. I mean, did you two agree that? Was that collusion or did he rush off and – or did you approve, Hilary?

HILARY MANTEL: When Peter and I first met, what I said to him is, "When I imagine this book...I didn't really have to say about lights and shades, candlelight." I think he just knew that, but I remember saying to Peter, "In every frame of the book, on every page in every transaction I see the wobble of the handheld camera, which brings me back to witnessing and reliability." And I think your face illuminated my sitting room at that point, because I think it was catching onto your thought about what the mode of the drama should be.

SUE LAWLEY: Was this a Eureka moment, Peter?

Peter Kosminsky: Well I tended to work with handheld cameras so it was more like, you know, I have to be honest and say I was feeling a little bit like what am I doing here, taking on this extraordinary project sitting opposite this double Booker Prize Winner and when Hilary said that to me, I just felt well, maybe there's just an iota of legitimacy here. But Hilary, I actually wanted to ask you about a film I and my colleagues made some years before I was privileged to work on your extraordinary books. I made a film for BBC about British soldiers keeping the peace in Bosnia, and sometime after I was there I attended a BBC programme review meeting. And the Deputy Head of BBC News said to me, "I don't know why we bothered with our daily news broadcasts from

Bosnia, putting our reporters in harm's way" and you'll remember Martin Bell was injured covering the war in Bosnia. When you guys can sit back five years later and tie it up neatly in a bow. When drama reflects on events from a distance, whether it's five years or five hundred years, what do you think is gained and what is lost?

HILARY MANTEL: Perspective. If you want the immediate truthful, in a way, ragged response, you respond as a journalist. You report but you haven't got the perspective. You have the immediacy. Writers of history or writers of historical novelist, you *have* the perspective. You know how it played out. Your duty then is to lift the burden of hindsight and it's to put your view up or your reader right back in that situation. In the moment, where it was all to play for, when nobody knew what would happen in the next heartbeat...And I think that really is the whole point of the fictional project, if I extend that to mean film and TV.

We are connecting emotionally and we shouldn't be ashamed for saying that, because what we are trying to give our viewer or reader is an experience of what it might've been like to be there, which is rather different from the collected wise after the event view that commentators and historians offer.

SUE LAWLEY: There's a gentleman just behind Peter there. He's been – and any other hands-----

Q: Stanley Wells: I write about Shakespeare. You mentioned Anthony Burgess who wrote both a novel and a biography about Shakespeare. What's the difference?

HILARY MANTEL: In this particular case, I couldn't comment because I haven't read his biography of Shakespeare. I think generally, you know, the two genres can run very close. If you think of Peter Ackroyd's biography of Charles Dickens in which he not only dramatized the kings but he admitted himself to the text and he had conversations with his subject. And he got a lot of flak for it at the time but I thought it made a very imaginative and lively read. Generally, I think the biographer stops working, downs tools a lot quicker than the novelist does because he says, like the historian, "I come to this frontier and after that, I cannot know, and quite properly takes his hands off." And if he's a good biographer, shares the perplexity with the reader and maybe opens up one or two possibilities for them. It could have been this, it could have been that, but then the reviewers descend and kick hell out of them for too much imagination. So it's an unenviable trade. The novelist has a lot more license. The novelist knows where he or she most effectively goes to work and that's where the facts run out.

SUE LAWLEY: Which did you prefer Sir Stanley ? Stay in the living novel or the biography?

Stanley Wells: Oh, I like both, of course, but Anthony Burgess does end at least one paragraph of his biography with a sense of it's to the effect of, all you've just read is total nonsense. Or pure conjecture. He even knew what he was doing, but there was a very big line, I think, often between-----

HILARY MANTEL: Well, a man with a great sense of mischief.

SUE LAWLEY: Question over there...

Anne Holland, retired Head Teacher and Volunteer at Chastleton National Trust House, which of course, part of *Wolf Hall* was filmed in. It's a very naïve question. I'm a Catholic, and to me, the character of Thomas Cromwell was portrayed as a great hero. And of course, like everything, nobody's black or white, but it intrigues me to see how strongly the views were both within the book, the film and the TV.

HILARY MANTEL: I hope to produce a nuanced portrait of Thomas Cromwell, as of Thomas Moore, of Henry VIII and all my characters, but good writers need good readers. The reader has to be prepared to lay aside their prejudices and read the nuances and interrogate every line asking how reliable is this person as witness to his story or someone else's story. Their texts of *Wolf Hall* and *Bring Up The Bodies* ripple with doubt. My aim is to keep the text alive. It's all about, as it were, putting the past back into process. So, what I'm trying to do...if I had written my books at say, from the point of view of Ann Boleyn, or I had chosen Thomas Moore as my lead character, then you would have a very, very different text but it doesn't mean that I am insincere or that text contains lies. The novel cannot, I think, be a neutral text but it can be a nuanced one.

Q: My name is **Fergus Morgan**. I'm a freelance theatre critic. If the – as you say – the role of the adapter is to mine, choose for meaning, just as the historian must tell stories from facts and the commentator must make sense of the news, then what do you think the role of the critic is? Is it to show the truth behind the adaptation again, or simply to assess the success of the adapter?

HILARY MANTEL: I think there is an inherent problem here, because as I said in my talk, when you adapt from a novel, the novel becomes the canonical text. So the adapter is not really in a position to quarrel with a novel. So if the original novelist has got everything wrong, it's then very tough on the adapter, but if he then nips behind the text and starts to tell another history which he might think is more realistic, has more voracity, then in succeeding as a playwright, he may fail as an adapter. So there's no good way out of that but I think in a sense that's the kind of decision that must be faced before work begins. So as an adapter you would have to have faith in your material. That...you might not agree with it but you would have to see it as a fair and a dramatic representation of the facts.

Margaret Shewring, Theatre and Performance Studies, University of Warwick. Dame Hilary, have audiences, for the stage adaptations of your novels, taken you by surprise? Perhaps unexpectedly illuminating a particular moment or moments by their audible reactions, a laugh, a gasp, or just silence?

HILARY MANTEL: Oh yes. And the delight of being a constant audience member is really, you do become aware of the power of what happens in an audience. You know one vital thing was you have to think in this context, what kind of knowledge are the audience going to bring to the play, and that was different, you know, in the case of every audience member. And I remember in one of the very early performances of *Wolf Hall*, you have Cardinal Wolsey and Thomas Cromwell and you have a young man who's playing the lute. And the Cardinal says to him, "Thank you, Mark," and he goes. And the woman behind me whispered, "That's Mark Smeaton." I realized in that split second that her experience of the play and of the second play, because she knew that he was one of the men who was going to die with Anne Boleyn, her experience would be completely different from that of the naïve playgoer, if you like, who was seated next to her, had just

thought, oh, that was a boy called Mark. And that moment was so illuminating for me, but you know, someone used the word control. And that is the kind of instance in which you simply don't have control. You have to abdicate it and do it joyfully and be open to audience response.

SUE LAWLEY: But in a sense you had total control at the execution of Anne Boleyn, because the television adaptation was completely faithful to that, completely riveting description that you put on the page. Did you insist on that? Did you want it to be exactly as it was?

HILARY MANTEL: Oh, I would never insist on anything. That's not my place.

SUE LAWLEY: But were you pleased that it was?

HILARY MANTEL: In the book in *Bringing Up The Bodies*, there is no moment at which Anne loses her head. There is a sort of gap in the sentence. And it took a lot of doing, I can tell you. Remember what I said at the beginning, the hardest thing to do on the page is something that happens suddenly. And you have to find a way around it. And that, it's one time when the novelist really is at a, just said on to it. What I did on the page was, I didn't describe emotion or anything seen. I just skipped sideways and described a sound, and it was a sound like the wind whistling through a keyhole and it was the blood leaving Anne's body. And the moment when the executioner strikes is not actually on the page. It's in your imagination, the most powerful place.

SUE LAWLEY: It was on the television screen. It was pretty powerful there too.

Sasha Charwood. I'm a student at Sutton Coldfield Grammar School for Girls. How can you get into the characters that you write about without being more prejudiced to maybe how you think and keeping it true to history as well?

SUE LAWLEY: Without being more what, to the way you think?

Sasha Charwood: Like, without kind of curving the way history works to the way you think, the way you feel about something?

HILARY MANTEL: You can't because you are always writing out of your own time and your own sensibility. But you educate yourself towards you characters and that's why it takes such a long time. That's what all the hours, days, years in libraries are about. It's about growing knowledge, knowledge and another sensibility that will stand beside the one you started out with, the one that's native to you. So in other words, you look to your characters to change you and scrape up to their standard, if you like, get inside their heads and bodies. It's not quickly achieved. It's a kind of blend of intellectual requirements. So study, and playing. Just acting. Just being them. Just saying, let's suppose. And it's about listening to the past. I don't say you can hear it, but you can be quiet and listen, and you can look. And you can open yourself to the process. I think, for me certainly, what I have to do is, yes - cram all the facts into my head so I have them when I'm ready to write a scene, but then in a sense I have to forget them because the character doesn't necessarily know them all and have to walk forward with the character in ignorance... in the kind of ignorance that is a great privilege because you really have to make yourself not know what's in the next room or what the consequence of this will be or what will happen in the next five minutes. And I think what you do

then is immerse yourself in that present reality. And somehow, without being mystical about it, it is a reality but it's not quite yours. Control, again, that's the magic word this evening, you take your hands off and it happens.

SUE LAWLEY: And you spent the last ten years with your hands both on and off Cromwell. It'd probably be twelve years before you've finished with him.

HILARY MANTEL: Yes.

SUE LAWLEY: Are you going to be able to live without him?

HILARY MANTEL: Well, he certainly managed to live without me all these years. I think, you know, as soon as he is dead on the page, there's Peter Kosminsky in the audience waiting for him to rise again, and yes, we all get another go at it. So it doesn't feel to me like a final moment. Again, it's one of these things where you have to split yourself. You have to deliver the emotional charge of an ending, but then there has to be a next page and there will be.

SUE LAWLEY: And there we must end it. Many thanks to our hosts here at the Arts House in Stratford-on-Avon and of course, to our audience here and those throughout the series in Manchester, London, Antwerp and Exeter for their questions. You can find the lectures and explore the Reith Archive on our website where there are transcripts, audios and much more. That's via the Reith pages on the BBC website. But finally, let me offer huge thanks to you, Hilary, for a thoughtful and thought-provoking series of lectures. It's been a great privilege to accompany you along the way. Thank you very much indeed. Ladies and gentlemen, the BBC's Reith Lecturer 2017, Dame Hilary Mantel.

[APPLAUSE]

END.