

BBC Learning English
6 Minute English
21 February 2013
The 'plastic' princess?



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- Finn:** Hello, I'm Finn, welcome to 6 Minute English. With me in the studio today is Neil.
- Neil:** Hi there, Finn.
- Finn:** Hello Neil. Today we have a royal story about Catherine, Duchess of Cambridge – or as she is still often known – Kate Middleton.
- Neil:** Yes, Prince William's wife has been in the news this week after a well-known British novelist compared her to a "**shop-window mannequin** with no personality of her own".
- Finn:** Now, the novelist in question is a woman called Hilary Mantel. She has won a number of awards for her books set during the rule of Henry VIII - he's an English king from the Tudor period.
- Neil:** The Tudor period – that's the 16th Century, well from 1485-1603 to be precise!
- Finn:** Very good, Neil, and as a history graduate I'm not surprised you knew that! But can you tell me, how many wives Henry VIII had? Was it:
- a) four
 - b) five
 - c) six
- Neil:** Well I took my degree a long time ago but I can still remember, I'm pretty sure, the answer is 'c' – six.
- Finn:** Ok, well let's find out if you are right at the end of the programme. Going back to Hilary Mantel, her quotes are from a long speech she made - the London Review of Books Lecture - on the subject of royal women.
- Neil:** We're going to listen to three clips from the speech itself. In the first, just pay attention to the descriptive language you hear.
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Author Hilary Mantel

Kate Middleton, as she was, appeared to have been designed by a committee, and built by craftsmen, with the perfect, plastic smile, and the spindles of her limbs hand-turned and gloss-varnished.

Finn: We hear a number of interesting phrases here: Kate is "designed by a committee" – which means designed by a group of people who all have an interest in the outcome.

Neil: Yes, it's a negative phrase. She is then "built by craftsmen" with the "perfect, plastic smile".

Finn: And it goes on to say that the "spindles of her limbs are hand-turned and gloss varnished". A **spindle** is a thin, wooden rod – and so this is a description you would expect of a beautiful doll: lovingly hand-made and then covered in shiny, protective varnish.

Neil: Indeed – the language used is quite imaginative, as we'd expect from an award-winning novelist, and it uses the vocabulary of craft or craftsmanship. It is what we might call an **extended metaphor**, we might say, – a long comparison.

Finn: But when the long comparison is to a doll – to an object – you can see why it has caused controversy.

Neil: That's right, which is the interesting point: by comparing Kate Middleton to an object, Hilary Mantel is really describing how she is portrayed by the media.

Finn: We call this process **objectification** – becoming an object.

Neil: Let's listen to a bit more of the speech.

Author Hilary Mantel:

Machine-made, precision-made: so different from Diana, whose human awkwardness and emotional incontinence showed in every gesture.

Neil: Again we hear the language of manufacture – Kate is "precision-made", "**machine-made**" – made according to precise plans, as if by machine.

Finn: Unlike Diana who was very human. She talks about Diana's "**emotional incontinence**". Incontinence is when you can't control yourself when you need the toilet.

Neil: So emotional incontinence is when you can't stop your emotions from showing – they showed "in her every **gesture**" – in each gesture or movement of her body.

Finn: Although Mantel says she may have had more personality, as we know, things ended badly for Diana:

Author Hilary Mantel:

We don't cut off the heads of royal ladies these days but we do sacrifice them, and we did memorably drive one to destruction a scant generation ago.

Finn: Hilary Mantel suggests that the media and public drove Diana to destruction – the constant attention on her private life was what caused Diana's death.

Neil: And this happened "a **scant** generation ago" - which means "barely a generation ago" – not long at all.

Finn: Now, as I'm sure many people will know Diana died in a car crash, but many royals in history died by one particular means – as Mantel says – they had their heads cut off.

Neil: Which brings us back to the question at the beginning of the programme. I know that two of Henry VIII's wives had their heads cut off, or were **beheaded**, but you asked how many he had in total.

Finn: Yes, was it:

- a) four
- b) five
- c) six

Neil: And I said 'c' – six.

Finn: And you were absolutely right so well done there.

Neil: My memory is good.

Finn: Very good. Before we go, Neil, could you remind us of some of the words we learned today?

Neil: Yes. We heard:

shop-window mannequin

objectification

machine-made

emotional incontinence

gesture

scant

beheaded

Finn: Thanks Neil. Well, that's it for today, let's behead the programme. Please join us again soon for 6 Minute English from bbclearningenglish.

Both: Bye.

Vocabulary and definitions

shop-window mannequin	a life-sized doll used to display clothes in shop windows
spindle	a thin, wooden rod around which something turns
extended metaphor	long comparison
objectification	treating people like objects
machine-made	made by machine
emotional incontinence	inability to control one's emotions
gesture	movement of one's body to express a feeling
scant	mere, barely
beheaded	had their heads cut off

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