

BBC Learning English
6 Minute English
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The 'plastic' princess?



- 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.

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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