

THOUGH THE COIN BE FAIR: HALLMARKING AND LANGUAGE

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The acid test being carried out at the London Assay Office.
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PRECIOUS METAL HAS BEEN A SOURCE OF FASCINATION for human beings since earliest times, and assaying is mentioned in the Bible as far back as the book of Isaiah (8th century BCE). It is little wonder that references to assaying have been absorbed into our language, becoming subject to semantic change and acquiring wider cultural significance.

The explanation of the phrase the 'acid test' is a popular part of tours of the Hall and visitors are often surprised to learn that it has its roots in assaying. When a piece of gold is tested in this way, it is drawn across a touchstone, leaving a coloured line. A touchneedle of the correct carat is then drawn across the stone next to the original mark. A drop of nitric acid is applied to each line, and the colours are compared by eye. According to conservator and author Andrew W Oddy the first mention of the use of acid in a touchstone test is in the account of the Mint in Moslem, Egypt, in the 13th century. Skip forward four centuries and the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) identifies the first reference to the set phrase 'the acid test' as dating to 1759. By 1854 it had come to be used to signify 'a crucial or definitive test' whether of character, business or any other quality; and by 1925 it was being used in a business phrase: the 'acid test ratio' refers to a business's ability to meet its obligations: 'usually calculated as the ratio of liquid assets to current liabilities' (OED).

For Britain's poets and playwrights, the assaying process has provided an analogy for test of character over the centuries. In her study of Chaucer's literary use of gold, Valerie Allen cites the following lines from the *Clerk's Tale* to indicate the way in which Chaucer often used the metal to indicate someone's true nature (in this case, two women):

For if that they were put to swiche assayes,
The gold of hem hath now so badde alloyes
With bras, that thogh the coyne be fair at ye
It wolde rather brest a-two than plye

(If they were put to the assay, the gold is so badly alloyed with brass, that though the coin looks fair, it would sooner break in two than bend).

Shakespeare similarly employed the touchstone for literary effect. The fool in *As You Like It*, who 'tests' characters, was called Touchstone (and was first played by Robert Armin, a member of the Goldsmiths' Company). Now, the word used to describe this black, finely-grained stone is also used to generally define 'a reference point by which something is assessed or judged'.

The Goldsmiths' Company's practices aren't the only things which have found their way into language: its building has too. The OED's entry for the word 'hall-mark' explains the word's origins lying in 'hall – the name of the London Assay Office at Goldsmiths' Hall' with its first reference identified in 1721 in the *London Gazette*. As marking at Goldsmiths' Hall commenced in 1478, this seems a rather late development, and perhaps earlier references will be found. As with the acid test, the meaning has evolved over time to be used in other contexts – it is also defined as 'a distinctive mark or token of genuineness, good breeding, or excellence.'

To the modern English speaker, a masterpiece is a piece of outstanding skill, often associated with high artistry. Originally from the Dutch word '*meesterstik*', in English this became 'masterstick', evolving to masterpiece by 1600. Unlike the assaying examples, it is not specific to goldsmithing – the term is used by other guilds and companies. It signifies a piece made by someone to prove that they are worthy of joining a guild, and Goldsmiths' Company apprentices present their masterpieces to the wardens to earn their freedoms today, as they have over many centuries.

Finally, when we talk of something being 'up to standard', we are using hallmarking terminology to indicate the meeting of expectations, but other phrases are less clear-cut. According to official sources, the phrase 'up to scratch' refers to sporting terminology (particularly boxing or cricket), but within the assay office it has long been associated with the lines of colour left on the touchstone during the acid test, and the idea of a piece being up to standard. The door is open for challenges to the official definition. ♦