A Short Soliloquy on Merit

ABSTRACT Merit is often considered to be a neutral and therefore fair way to judge quality. Through soliloquy and graphics, this essay deconstructs and interrogates the definition of merit, revealing the ways that it is tied to standardization and dominant knowledge. KEYWORDS Merit; Soliloquy; Power; Deconstruction; Diversity

Soliloquy is a dramatic device used when a character speaks to herself, “relating thoughts and feelings, thereby also sharing them with the audience, giving off the illusion of being a series of unspoken reflections.”

When conversing with others, we are also conversing with ourselves. Soliloquy is therefore recursive and elliptical. What’s more, soliloquy transforms abbreviated self-talk into external conversation and “transforms our raw, bodily sensations into emotions.”

The following is a short soliloquy inspired by the definition of merit and the question of “what = merit?”

The definition of “merit.” Google and the Google logo are registered trademarks of Google LLC, used with permission.
Through soliloquy, the interlocuter deconstructs and interrogates the idea that merit is neutral. Rather, the concept is both the consequence and cause of ongoing power relations that privilege dominant, standardized, and white knowledge.4

I wrote the soliloquy in light of a crisis and awareness of racism in communication studies and the ways that diversity and merit have been framed as antithetical.

The italicized words in the soliloquy come directly from the Google definition. In the soliloquy, the interlocuter is both speaker and listener. Interrogator and discipliner. Betwixt and between. Liminal.

*****

Are you meritorious? Are you excellent? Are you good?

To be meritorious is to be standard. Are you standard? Do you avoid drawing outside the lines?

To be meritorious is to be level. Are you level? For goodness sake, be level-headed, polite, and civil.

If you are not standard and you are not level, you will certainly not make the grade. Better do some extra credit if you ever hope to be worthy.

And take time to account for your virtue. You do want to be virtuous, yes? And praised?

Learn the right forms of virtue and you too may someday be deserving of distinction, worthy of credit, and entitled to eminence.

Just make sure to account for it in standard ways that show your quality. You need to clearly show your caliber in order to receive the right kind of attention.

A graphic deconstruction of “merit.” The concept of merit may appear neutral, but is infused with notions of standardization, standing in sharp contrast to diversity and difference. Image created and provided by author.
What? You say you have different values and *virtue* from the *level standard*? *Quality* for you looks different? You seek non-*standard* reward?

Hush my darling.

Shhh . . . Best keep that to yourself. Or better yet, morph. Simply change thyself.

If not, you may attract the wrong *attention, worthy of punishment.*

Do you know the people who are arbiters of *merit*? They get to say whether you are *entitled to distinction.* Only they have a right to praise you as *qualified.*

Do you want to *earn* their approval? Keep *leveling.* Keep *standardizing,* Keep *accounting.*

Someday, maybe, your efforts will *warrant deservingness.* Someday, maybe, your work will achieve the mantle of *quality.*

Keep striving. Try just a wee bit harder.

Because the criteria for *excellence, distinction,* and *praise* are neutral: based purely on *merit.*

---

**NOTES**