

Forum

PMLA invites members of the association to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles in previous issues or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. The editor reserves the right to reject or edit contributions for publication and offers the authors discussed an opportunity to reply to the letters published. The journal discourages footnotes and regrets that it cannot consider any letter of more than 1,000 words.

The First Professor of English

To the Editor:

May I provide a point of information about misleading implications that might arise from Franklin E. Court's article (103 [1988]: 796–807) and the response to it (104 [1989]: 221–22)? “The first professor of English” was by no means Thomas Dale at University College, London. Preceding him by three-quarters of a century was one Ebenezer Kinnersley, who held the title Professor of English beginning in 1753, at the academy that would become the University of Pennsylvania.

Anyone familiar with historical plaques in Philadelphia today will be unsurprised to learn that English as an academic discipline, like so much else, was founded by Benjamin Franklin. Unimpressed by theology as a focus for higher education and by the value of classical languages therefor, Franklin insisted that the charter of Pennsylvania Academy include a stipulation that English literature be taught.

Thirty-eight years later, though, Franklin's next-to-last letter before his death scolds the trustees for blatant attempts to subvert the founders' vision of English education. The trustees, in glorifying classical literature and denigrating English, had been using administrative tactics familiar today: financial disincentives, inequitable work loads, sexism, and punishment for good teaching.

At the Pennsylvania Academy in 1751, the Greek and Latin teacher held the title Rector. As assistant he had a tutor for every twenty students. He earned £200. The English teacher earned £150 and had a tutor for every forty students. His title was Master of the English School. His name was David Dove. He was young. He was dynamic. He performed English literature for his classes—today his practices would be termed oral interp or readers' theater—and he taught them oral performance. Dramatic readings by his students were enthusiastically attended by parents and the general public. Dove attracted ninety students, an enormous number at that time. Still bursting with energy, he began using evenings and weekends to teach literary performance to classes of girls.

The trustees intervened. David Dove was fired in 1753. In his place the trustees hired Ebenezer Kinnersley, an aging man with personality to match his name and no demonstrable interest in literature in any language. Parents complained at the cessation of public readings. Enrollment in English courses plummeted. While Ben

Franklin was out of the country in 1769, the trustees voted to discontinue English, but they were stymied by the charter. Instead Ebenezer Kinnersley continued to plod around and around the post, which was retitled Professor of English in 1753, until his death twenty long years later. English has regularly been taught at Penn since then, albeit sometimes offhandedly by the professor of Latin or the professor of history.

This letter does not call for a reply from Court, as he nowhere states that Thomas Dale was the first English professor anywhere. I just wanted to set the record straight, and also hint that the recent upsurge of interest in performance analysis has roots in the history of the discipline.

BETSY BOWDEN
Rutgers University, Camden

Ibsen's Nora

To the Editor:

Ibsen's Nora can do without Joan Templeton's defense (“*The Doll House Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen*,” 104 [1989]: 28–40). Besides being lovable, Nora is selfish, frivolous, seductive, unprincipled, and deceitful. These qualities make her the remarkable dramatic character she is, and demonstrate Ibsen's capacity to turn polemic into play.

The important point about Ibsen the artist is that Nora lacked her deepening dimensions in the first draft. She started out a sweet, martyred wife oppressed by a selfish husband, to suit Ibsen's thesis: “There are two kinds of moral law, two kinds of conscience, one in man and a completely different one in woman. . . . A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day. . . . A mother in modern society is as useless, after she bears children, as insects who go away and die.”

So Ibsen began with a maltreated, stuffed Nora doll, deceptive only to conceal her noble act of saving her husband. Then suddenly, in the act of creation, Nora forced a character on the playwright—when Torvald asked her, midway, about the scratches she had made on the mailbox as she tried to steal the letter “exposing” her. How did Nora absolve herself? By blaming the scratches on her thieving children! Talk about principle! But do any great dramatic characters stick unwaveringly to principle? Ib-