

## **Report on an InULA Research Incentive Grant**

**by Perry Willett**

I received an InULA Research Incentive Fund grant of \$600 to attend the Modern Language Association (MLA) convention in Chicago from December 27-30, 1999. The grant allowed me to attend the convention as an exhibitor of the Victorian Women Writers Project (VWWP), in order to discuss its use with attendees. I was asked by Julia Flanders of the Women Writers Online project at Brown University if I wanted to share a booth with them at MLA. A representative from the Emily Dickinson Archive, Martha Nell Smith of the University of Maryland, also shared the booth. The total cost for the booth was over \$2,400, for a table, sign, chairs, and an ISDN line for an Internet connection. Julia brought her own iMac. With the help of the grant, I was able to pay \$400 towards the cost of the booth-not my fair share, but the Women Writers Online project is a for-fee database while the VWWP has no budget. The experience of being "on the other side" as a vendor at a professional conference was very educational. I learned first-hand some of the gripes of vendors. Our biggest complaint was that the ISDN line never worked. Julia spent most of Sunday (before the conference opened), Monday and part of Tuesday on the phone with customer service representatives of various companies. The convention organizers had contracted with Ameritech for the phone and ISDN lines, so there was nothing they could do. The ISDN line seemed to work, but we could never get the iMac configured properly for the Internet connection to work, and there was no one who could help us with that. Other vendors used phone lines with modems that seemed to work fine. As a result, we could not demonstrate our respective databases. This was probably more critical for the Women Writers Online project, since people without a subscription cannot view it. I had printed a brochure with the URL for the VWWP, so at least people could take it with them and try it from home.

I ended up spending more time at the booth than I expected, filling in while Julia dealt with the ISDN line. I learned that standing around, trying to catch the eye of passers-by, is hard work, sort of like a three-day-long junior high school dance. Fortunately, many people did stop by. I had expected to talk to people who had used the VWWP in their teaching and research, and learn from them how they use it and in what directions they'd like to see the project go. Instead, I found that most of the people I spoke with, even those in Victorian or women's studies, had not even heard of the project. I spent most of my time describing it to them (since I couldn't demonstrate it). I found this somewhat surprising, and an indication of the shallow impact of the Internet on humanities research and teaching. It was extremely valuable to be reminded how much work there still to do in integrating projects such as the VWWP into literary studies.

Attending MLA was extremely valuable for me and for the VWWP, for I was able to reach out to many people who hadn't yet used the collection. This was an important step in the continuing effort to build awareness of and support for the project. I thank InULA for their support.