

Paula James (1950–2026)

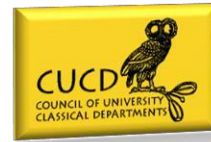
by Emma-Jayne Graham



Paula James, shortly before her retirement in 2015.

Colleagues will be sad to learn that Dr Paula James passed away on Monday 12th January 2026.

Paula was a Staff Tutor and Senior Lecturer in Classical Studies at The Open University from 1993 until her retirement in 2015. Before this she had taught at the University of Leeds and had also worked as a Latin teacher in a number of schools across the country. Anyone who ever met Paula will know that she was passionate about a great many things, both within and beyond Classical Studies, but as a committed Marxist she was especially deeply invested in the need to provide access to education for working class people. The OU was always going to be the perfect fit for her. And so it proved to be. As someone who came to Classics as a mature student, she was herself a great example of the sort of transformative powers of education

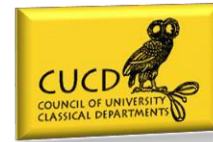


offered by the OU with its mission to promote educational opportunities to all.

At the OU, Paula made significant contributions to teaching across both Classical Studies and the Arts Faculty, primarily focusing on Latin language and the Roman world. Like her research, her teaching expertise was eclectic, ranging widely from the Roman family and Roman North Africa, to ancient and modern receptions of Seneca and, most memorably, Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Her hugely popular chapter on the Colosseum for *A103 (An Introduction to the Humanities)* was responsible for providing several thousand OU students with one of their first encounters with the ancient world. Outside her OU teaching, she was very proud to be able to reach even more new learners when she was commissioned to write *Teach Yourself: Roman Civilization* (first published in 1999). Her colleagues – in the Classical Studies department but also across the wider Associate Lecturer, Staff Tutor, and former OU Region 13 community in the southeast – remember Paula for her fierce intelligence as well as for her warm personality. She was a welcoming and supportive figure and, importantly, a good friend.

Paula was articulate, principled, passionate, and always determined to hold the university senior management to account, and this included a succession of different Vice Chancellors. She had strong values, and eloquently expressed opinions, always keeping others right on many issues, whether at the OU or in more public arenas, such as the Classicists mailing list. She was particularly active as a representative voice for OU regional colleagues and Associate Lecturers, many of whom have contacted the department to share memories of how encouraging and kind she was to them, especially when they were facing difficult challenges.

A Latinist by training, Paula gained her PhD at Southampton on Apuleius (published in 1987). Yet it was classical reception that occupied much of Paula's time in the later stages of her career. As well as *The Role of the Parrot in Selected Texts from Ovid to Jean Rhys* (edited with Julia Courtney, 2006), on a topic which was a personal favourite and which she spoke about on an episode of 'Woman's Hour' on Radio 4, she wrote *Ovid's Myth of Pygmalion on Screen: In Pursuit of the Perfect Woman* (2011). Shortly before her retirement Paula published with Annie Ravenhill-Johnson



the first study of trade union history and the use of classical images as popular art in trade union banners: *The Art and Ideology of the Trade Union Emblem, 1850–1925* (2013). Members of the department remember her talking passionately about this project and how it had finally allowed her to bring together so many aspects of her political and academic life. A video she made about this project can be viewed on OpenLearn: [Protest Banners: Trade Union | OpenLearn - Open University](#)

Paula was diagnosed with Primary Lateral Sclerosis (PLS), a rare form of Motor Neurone Disease, in March 2022. Before she became too unwell, and in typical Paula style, she recorded [a video sharing her experiences of the condition](#). In doing so, Paula hoped to educate more people about this largely unknown condition, while also aiming to support and comfort others facing the same diagnosis. In many ways that sums Paula up, always fighting the good fight, and always doing so for the benefit of others. She will be greatly missed by her many friends and colleagues.