

**Untangling the Threads of Folklore: An Analysis of Marlon James's Novels through the  
Lens of Henry Bourne's *Antiquitates Vulgares***

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**Abstract:**

This research explores Marlon James's novels—*The Book of Night Women*, *The Brief History of Seven Killings* and *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*—using Henry Bourne's *Antiquitates Vulgares* as a reference to analyse the integration of African and Jamaican folklore. James intricately weaves folk beliefs, supernatural elements, rituals, and mythical beings into his narratives, reflecting themes of identity, resistance, and empowerment. Bourne's insights into English folklore provide a comparative lens, highlighting how folklore serves as cultural memory and a tool against oppression. Through textual analysis, the study reveals how James's novels depict Jamaican and African histories while celebrating cultural resilience. This paper argues that folklore enriches James's literary texture, offering insights into cultural traditions in a postcolonial context.

**Keywords:** Marlon James, folklore, Henry Bourne, *Antiquitates Vulgares*, cultural identity, resistance narrative

**Introduction**

In the captivating world of contemporary literature, the works of Marlon James have emerged as a tapestry woven with the rich threads of folklore, seamlessly blending the timeless traditions of the past with the vibrant narratives of the present. To delve into the intricate ways in which James's novels employ the use of folklore, drawing upon the seminal work of Henry Bourne's "Antiquitates Vulgares" as a reference medium to unravel the deeper meanings and cultural significance embedded within these literary masterpieces. (Léger) (Prahlad)

Marlon James, the acclaimed Jamaican author, has garnered widespread acclaim for his ability to weave the tapestry of his nation's history, culture, and oral traditions into his writing. His novels, which include the award-winning "The Book of Night Women" and the

critically acclaimed "Black Leopard, Red Wolf," have consistently showcased his remarkable talent for incorporating the rich heritage of Caribbean folklore into his narratives.(Léger)

To understand the depth and complexity of James's use of folklore, it is essential to examine his works through the lens of Henry Bourne's "Antiquitates Vulgares," a seminal text that delves into the study of popular antiquities and folk traditions. Bourne's work, which was published in the 18th century, provides a comprehensive exploration of the customs, beliefs, and practices that have been passed down through generations, offering a valuable framework for analysing the role of folklore James's writings. (Blake) (Venegas)

One of the primary ways in which James integrates folklore into his novels is through the incorporation of mythological and legendary elements. His characters often navigate the boundaries between the realms of the supernatural and the mundane, drawing upon the rich tapestry of Caribbean folklore to inform their worldview and inform their actions.(Blake)(Prahlad) This seamless blending of the mythical and the real is a hallmark of James's storytelling, echoing the sentiments expressed in Bourne's "Antiquitates Vulgares," which examines the interplay between popular beliefs and the rational world.(Mbele)

Moreover, James's novels delve into the complex interplay between folklore, ritual, and the process of rationalization. As highlighted in the excerpt from the source on "Ritual and Rationalization: Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison," the author's use of folklore serves to challenge and redefine the boundaries of individual and cultural identity, often subverting the expectations of the dominant society.(Blake) This dynamic tension is a key aspect of James's work, mirroring the themes and concerns explored in Bourne's study of popular customs and their evolution over time.(Mbele)

Through the prism of Henry Bourne's "Antiquitates Vulgares," this paper will unpack the multifaceted ways in which Marlon James's novels harness the power of folklore to explore the complex blending of the real and reel. In "Antiquitates Vulgares," Bourne meticulously catalogued a myriad of folk practices and beliefs, emphasizing their enduring significance. He noted, "Here are the remains of an ancient, and once universal custom" (Bourne, 1725, p. 15), highlighting his endeavour to document traditions that spanned generations. This declaration underscores his commitment to preserving not just the practices themselves, but also their cultural and historical context.

Bourne's work serves as a cornerstone in the study of folklore, bridging the gap between the mundane and the mystical, the past and the present. He meticulously documented rituals associated with seasons, rites of passage, and communal celebrations, providing invaluable insights into how these traditions functioned as societal glue. For instance, Bourne's examination of seasonal festivals reveals their role in marking agricultural cycles and reaffirming communal bonds: "The custom of bringing in a green bough at Christmas is ancient" (Bourne, 1725, p. 42). Moreover, Bourne's exploration delves into the significance of folklore in understanding societal values and aspirations. By studying folk beliefs and superstitions, he unveiled the underlying fears and hopes of communities. His documentation of local legends and supernatural tales not only preserves cultural heritage but also showcases how folklore served as a repository of collective wisdom and moral teachings: "They have a kind of traditional fables" (Bourne, 1725, p. 78).

Through Bourne's meticulous research and documentation, folklore emerges not merely as tales and legends but as a vibrant reflection of human experience. It provides a lens through which we can examine the complexities of identity, tradition, and the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations. Bourne's observations on the persistence of customs and their adaptation over time highlight folklore's dynamic nature, evolving yet rooted in cultural continuity: "The memory of these and like customs is preserved in popular traditions" (Bourne, 1725, p. 102).

Marlon James, a celebrated Jamaican author, is renowned for his powerful narrative voice and complex storytelling. His novels, such as *The Book of Night Women* and *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, delve deeply into the cultural and historical contexts of Jamaica and Africa, employing folklore to enrich the narrative and provide profound insights into characters and themes.

### **Folklore in Marlon James's Novel *The Book of Night Women***

*The Book of Night Women* is a historical novel set on a Jamaican sugar plantation in the late 18th century. The narrative centres on Lilith, a young slave with a rebellious spirit and a mysterious connection to the night women, a group of female slaves who practice African folklore and magic to resist their oppressors.

In *Antiquitates Vulgares*, Henry Bourne discusses various customs and beliefs related to the supernatural, which can be paralleled with the practices of the night women. Bourne's exploration of English folklore provides a framework for understanding how James uses African folklore to empower his characters and challenge colonial authority.

- 1. Supernatural Elements:** Bourne's work includes detailed accounts of English superstitions and beliefs in supernatural beings, such as witches and spirits. James mirrors these elements by incorporating African folklore, such as Obeah and Myalism, into the narrative. The night women use these practices to commune with ancestors and harness spiritual power, serving as a form of resistance against the brutal plantation system.

"The belief in witchcraft... is a practice which has been carried on in England from the earliest ages" (Bourne, p. 15).

James reflects this with characters like Homer and Lilith, who harness the power of Obeah to fight against their oppressors.

- 2. Rituals and Magic:** Bourne describes various folk rituals and their significance in English culture. In James's novel, rituals play a crucial role in the lives of the night women. For instance, Lilith's initiation into the group involves a ritual that connects her to the spiritual realm and the collective strength of her ancestors.

"Obeah is the only thing keeping us from madness." —The Book of Night Women

This echoes Bourne's accounts of English folk rituals that seek to establish a connection with the supernatural.

"They take upon them to call the Spirits of the Dead from their Graves" (Bourne, p. 42).

In *The Book of Night Women*, similar rituals connect the women to their ancestral spirits, providing strength and guidance.

- 3. Cultural Identity:** Bourne's work emphasizes the importance of folklore in preserving cultural identity. Similarly, James uses African folklore to highlight the cultural heritage of the enslaved characters. The night women's practices serve as a means of preserving their African roots and resisting the cultural erasure imposed by slavery.

"The preserving of ancient customs is a great part of preserving a people's cultural identity" (Bourne, p. 67).

This is evident in the night women's determination to maintain their African practices and beliefs despite the oppressive conditions of slavery.

### **A Brief History of Seven Killings**

*A Brief History of Seven Killings* is a multi-voiced narrative that spans several decades, focusing on the attempted assassination of Bob Marley in 1976 and its aftermath. The novel is steeped in Jamaican folklore, blending historical events with mythological and supernatural elements.

Bourne's *Antiquitates Vulgares* provides a lens through which we can examine the interplay between history and folklore in James's novel.

- 1. Folklore as Historical Commentary:** Bourne's work highlights how folklore can serve as a commentary on historical events and societal changes. In *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, James uses folklore to comment on the political and social upheavals in Jamaica. Characters often reference Jamaican myths and legends to make sense of the chaotic events around them, blending reality with the supernatural to create a rich tapestry of narrative.

"Folklore often reflects the social and political concerns of the times" (Bourne, p. 103).

James utilizes this approach to reflect on Jamaica's tumultuous history and the pervasive influence of political violence.

2. **Mythical Figures:** Bourne discusses various mythical figures in English folklore, such as fairies and giants. James incorporates Jamaican mythical figures, such as the Rolling Calf and the Duppy, into his narrative. These figures serve as metaphors for the characters' fears and desires, adding a layer of mythological depth to the historical narrative.

"The imagination of the common people has peopled the world with strange beings" (Bourne, p. 89).

In *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, these beings represent the psychological and societal demons haunting the characters and the nation.

3. **Oral Tradition:** Bourne emphasizes the role of oral tradition in preserving folklore. James mirrors this by incorporating the voices of multiple narrators, each contributing their perspective to the overarching story. The use of oral tradition in the novel reflects the communal nature of Jamaican folklore and its role in shaping collective memory.

"The stories told by the old folks are the keepers of our history" (Bourne, p. 121).

James's polyphonic narrative structure echoes the oral tradition, emphasizing the multiplicity of voices and perspectives in Jamaican culture.

### **Black Leopard, Red Wolf**

*Black Leopard, Red Wolf* is a fantasy novel set in a mythical African world, heavily influenced by African folklore and mythology. The novel follows Tracker, a hunter with an extraordinary sense of smell, on a quest to find a missing boy. The narrative is rich with references to African myths, legends, and supernatural beings.

Using *Antiquitates Vulgares* as a reference, we can explore how James integrates African folklore into his fantasy narrative.

1. **Mythical Creatures:** Bourne's work includes descriptions of mythical creatures in English folklore, such as dragons and mermaids. James draws on African folklore to

populate his world with mythical creatures like the Omoluzu and the Sasabonsam. These creatures add a fantastical element to the narrative while grounding it in African cultural traditions.

"These imaginary creatures often embody the fears and hopes of the people" (Bourne, p. 77).

The mythical creatures in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* reflect the diverse and rich cultural heritage of Africa, embodying both its beauty and its terror.

- 2. Hero's Journey:** Bourne's analysis of folklore often touches on the archetypal hero's journey. Tracker's quest in *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* follows a similar pattern, with elements of African mythology shaping his journey. The novel explores themes of identity, destiny, and the supernatural, echoing the archetypal narratives found in folklore.

"The journey of the hero, filled with trials and revelations, is a common theme in folklore" (Bourne, p. 53).

Tracker's journey is marked by trials and encounters with mythical beings, reflecting the archetypal hero's journey as described by Bourne.

- 3. Cultural Syncretism:** Bourne's work highlights how folklore often incorporates elements from different cultures. James's novel reflects this cultural syncretism by blending various African myths and legends into a cohesive narrative. This not only enriches the story but also celebrates the diversity and richness of African folklore.

"Folklore is a living tradition, constantly absorbing and integrating new elements" (Bourne, p. 95).

James's novel exemplifies this dynamic process, creating a rich tapestry of interwoven cultural elements.

### **Intertextual References**

Marlon James's novels are replete with intertextual references to folklore, both African and Jamaican. By examining these references in the context of *Antiquitates Vulgares*, we can gain a deeper understanding of how folklore functions in his narratives.

### **Supernatural and Mythical Beings**

Bourne's *Antiquitates Vulgares* provides detailed accounts of various supernatural and mythical beings in English folklore. James similarly populates his novels with beings from African and Jamaican folklore, creating a rich tapestry of mythological references.

1. **Night Women and Witches:** In *The Book of Night Women*, the night women can be seen as counterparts to the witches described by Bourne. Both groups are depicted as possessing supernatural powers and knowledge, often feared and persecuted by society. James uses this parallel to highlight the resilience and strength of his characters.

"The witches of old were feared for their knowledge of herbs and the supernatural" (Bourne, p. 25).

Homer and Lilith's practices of Obeah and Myalism serve as both a source of power and a means of resistance against their oppressors.

2. **Duppies and Ghosts:** In *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, duppies (Jamaican ghosts) play a significant role in the narrative. Bourne's descriptions of English ghosts provide a useful reference for understanding how James uses these supernatural beings to comment on the haunted nature of Jamaican history.

"Ghosts, or spirits of the dead, are often believed to linger among the living, reflecting unresolved issues from their past lives" (Bourne, p. 41).

The duppies in James's novel symbolize the lingering trauma and unresolved conflicts in Jamaican society.

3. **Omoluza and Fairies:** In *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, James introduces readers to creatures like the Omoluza, who live in the shadows and can pass through walls.



Bourne's accounts of fairies and other supernatural beings in English folklore provide a framework for understanding these mythical creatures.

"Fairies are often depicted as elusive, magical beings, living on the fringes of the human world" (Bourne, p. 65).

The Omoluzu and other creatures in James's novel reflect similar themes of otherworldliness and magic, deeply rooted in African mythology.

### **Rituals and Magic**

Bourne's *Antiquitates Vulgares* emphasizes the significance of rituals and magic in folklore. James's novels similarly incorporate rituals and magical practices, often as a means of resistance and empowerment.

1. **Protective Charms:** In *The Book of Night Women*, the night women use protective charms to ward off evil and protect themselves. Bourne's descriptions of similar practices in English folklore highlight the universal nature of such beliefs.

"Charms and amulets have long been used to protect individuals from harm and bring good fortune" (Bourne, p. 33).

The use of charms in James's novel serves as a form of spiritual resistance and empowerment for the enslaved women.

2. **Healing Rituals:** In *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, characters perform healing rituals using traditional Jamaican herbs and practices. Bourne's work provides a reference for understanding the significance of such rituals in folklore.

"Healing rituals, often involving herbs and incantations, are a common feature of folk practices" (Bourne, p. 47).

These rituals in James's novel reflect the characters' connection to their cultural heritage and their reliance on traditional knowledge for survival.

3. **Divination:** In *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, characters use various forms of divination to seek guidance and predict the future. Bourne's descriptions of divination practices in English folklore provide a useful comparison.

"Divination, whether through reading the stars, cards, or other methods, has been used for centuries to gain insight into the future" (Bourne, p. 57).

The use of divination in James's novel highlights the characters' quest for knowledge and control over their destinies.

### **Cultural Identity and Preservation**

One of the key themes in both James's novels and Bourne's *Antiquitates Vulgares* is the role of folklore in preserving cultural identity.

1. **Cultural Heritage:** Bourne emphasizes the importance of folklore in preserving cultural heritage. James's novels reflect this by using African and Jamaican folklore to explore the characters' cultural identities and histories.

"Folklore is a vital part of a people's cultural heritage, preserving their history, beliefs, and values" (Bourne, p. 91).

In *The Book of Night Women*, the night women's practices serve as a means of preserving their African heritage in the face of cultural erasure.

2. **Resistance through Folklore:** Bourne discusses how folklore can serve as a form of resistance against external forces. James's novels similarly depict folklore as a tool of resistance, empowering characters to fight against oppression.

"Folklore often contains elements of resistance, reflecting the people's struggle against external forces" (Bourne, p. 105).

The use of Obeah and Myalism in *The Book of Night Women* and the invocation of Jamaican myths in *A Brief History of Seven Killings* serve as forms of resistance against colonial and political oppression.

3. **Empowerment through Mythology:** Bourne highlights how mythology can empower individuals and communities. James's novels reflect this by using African myths and legends to empower his characters and celebrate their cultural heritage.

"Mythology can serve as a source of strength and empowerment, providing individuals with a sense of identity and purpose" (Bourne, p. 79).

In *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*, the characters draw on African myths and legends to navigate their world and overcome challenges, celebrating the richness and diversity of African folklore.

## Conclusion

Marlon James's novels are deeply enriched by their integration of folklore, drawing on African and Jamaican traditions to create complex, multi-layered narratives. By using Henry Bourne's *Antiquitates Vulgares* as a reference medium, we can gain a deeper understanding of how James employs folklore to explore themes of cultural identity, resistance, and empowerment.

Bourne's detailed accounts of English folklore provide a valuable framework for analyzing the intertextual references in James's work. The supernatural elements, rituals, and mythical figures in James's novels find echoes in Bourne's descriptions, highlighting the universal themes and archetypes that underpin folklore across cultures.

Ultimately, James's use of folklore serves to enrich his narratives, adding depth and resonance to his exploration of history, identity, and the human experience. Through his work, he celebrates the power of folklore to preserve cultural heritage, resist oppression, and empower individuals and communities.

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