

# Beware *the Ides of March!*

BY GEORGIANNA ZIEGLER

As the Folger's Head of Reference, Georgianna Ziegler is often called upon to explain arcane lore and tidbits of Shakespeareana. Last spring, National Public Radio tapped her to tell its listeners why they should beware the ides of March—and what ides are anyway. Here is a reprise of her response.

**T**he Soothsayer says, “Beware the Ides of March.” Suddenly a chill falls on Caesar’s festive procession to the forum to celebrate the Lupercalia at the opening of Shakespeare’s play, *Julius Caesar*. The line is repeated three times—once by Brutus and twice by the Soothsayer—but is brushed aside by Caesar who responds, “He is a dreamer. Let us leave him.”

“Famous last words,” we might reply! Perhaps if Caesar *had* paid attention to the Soothsayer and to his wife Calpurnia’s premonitions, he might not have been killed—but that would be re-writing history.

The Ides fell on March 15th, signifying the middle of a Roman month, where the first day was the Kalends (hence, “calendar”). “Ides” comes from a Latin word meaning “to divide,” and fell on the 13th or the 15th, depending on the length of the month.

England in Shakespeare’s day was still basically following the old Julian calendar, named after Julius Caesar who had introduced it in 45 B.C. The



E. Scriven after R. Westall. *Julius Caesar*, Act IV. Scene iii. Engraving, 1802. Folger Shakespeare Library.

English differed, however, in beginning the new year for business purposes on March 25th, or “Lady Day,” named for the Feast of the Annunciation, rather than on January 1st as in the Julian calendar. Nevertheless, they still gave New Year’s presents around the first of the year.

But following the Julian calendar put the English at odds with most European countries, who by the time *Julius Caesar* was written around 1599 had already adopted the Gregorian calendar, revised by Pope Gregory in 1582. This meant that Protestant England was celebrating religious feasts on different days than Catholic Europe.

In 1598, the year before *Julius*

*Caesar* was performed, there were five weeks’ difference between the celebration of Easter in England and on the continent, which people would have noticed because they could compare the two calendars side-by-side in one of the many almanacs printed at the time. A number of people were not happy with this disparity.

Dates and prognostications play an important role in *Julius Caesar*. David Daniell who edited the play suggests that Brutus’s confusion about the date—March 1st or 15th—in Act 2 mirrors some of the problems Shakespeare’s audience would have had with their calendar. Confusion is also indicated in Shakespeare’s intentional combining of Caesar’s triumph, which actually took place in October, with the Lupercalia, a Roman festival celebrated in February, and the Ides of March.

In the ancient Roman calendar, the Ides marked the appearance of the full moon, which was generally viewed as a favorable omen. The death of Caesar on the Ides of March, however, came to make that day feel unlucky.

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J. Feldweg after H. Kaeseberg. *Act III. Scene ii from Julius Caesar* (German). Print, 1879. Folger Shakespeare Library.

## Julian Calendar 101

### Kalendae (Kalends)

First day of the month, from which the word "calendar" is derived; originally the day of the new moon.

### Nonae (Nones)

Originally the day of the half moon.

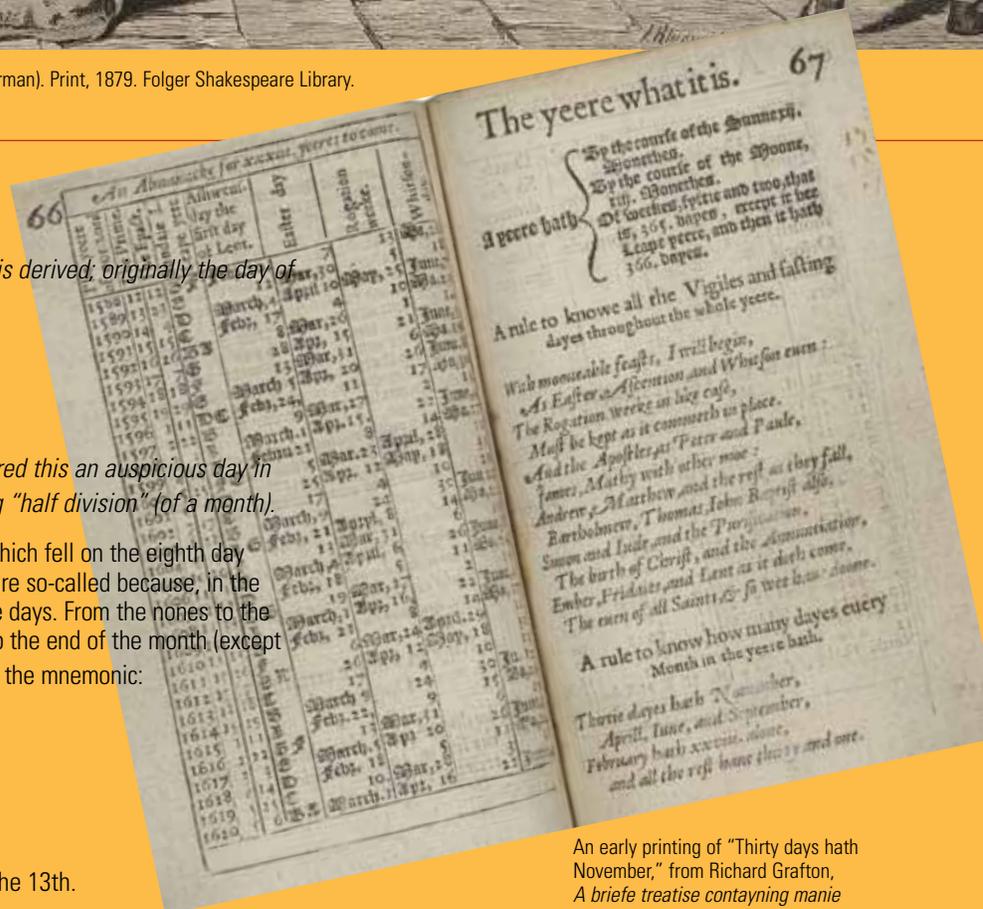
### Idūs (Ides)

Originally the day of the full moon. The Romans considered this an auspicious day in their calendar. The word *ides* comes from Latin, meaning "half division" (of a month).

The nones are related to the *nundinae*, the market days which fell on the eighth day of the eight-day market week used by the Romans. They are so-called because, in the Roman system of inclusive counting, they came every nine days. From the nones to the ides, there was exactly one market week. From the ides to the end of the month (except in February), there were exactly two market weeks; hence the mnemonic:

*March, May, July, October,  
These are they,  
Make nones the seventh,  
Ides the fifteenth day.*

In all other months, nones were on the 5th and ides on the 13th.



An early printing of "Thirty days hath November," from Richard Grafton, *A briefe treatise containing manie proper tables*... London, 1588. Folger Shakespeare Library.