

ANALYSIS

The Ides of March (1948)

Thornton Wilder

(1897-1975)

“One of the best fictionalizations of the life of Julius Caesar, this novel deals with the dictator’s last months and his assassination. The story is told through documents—letters, extracts from diaries, snatches of verse, proclamations, circulars—which reveal Wilder’s intimate knowledge of Roman antiquity. The book falls into four sections, each covering the same period of time. Thus the novel presents four views of the same events. Wilder’s Caesar is a sort of 20th-century agnostic, perhaps Wilder in a toga. J. M. Lalley has said that Wilder’s Caesar, unable to convert his contemporaries to his views, ‘acquiesced in his own murder out of sheer chagrin’.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

“*The Ides of March* (1948) concerns the events leading up to the assassination of Julius Caesar. The story is told entirely through documents, proclamations, and letters of the participants. The material is divided into four books as follows: Book I mainly concerns Clodia Pulcher, patrician daughter of a respected Roman family. Her mind has been disturbed by a variety of experiences; she is violated by an uncle, and her beliefs are upset by Caesar’s skepticism. She is loved by the poet Catullus, but despises him. Book II depicts the arrival of Cleopatra in Rome and her relations with Caesar; it describes her roles both as a woman and as a queen.

Clodia discovers a plot whereby Marc Antony is to be discovered embracing Cleopatra. Caesar happens along too soon, however, and the plan is thwarted. In Book III is related an incident which historically happened sometime before; Wilder concentrates the chronology for dramatic effect. Clodia arranges for her wild young brother, Clodius, to be spirited into the highly secret woman’s ritual of the Bona Dea. In the ensuing scandal Pompeia, Caesar’s wife, is accused of connivance, or even of adultery with Clodius, and Caesar divorces her. Book IV deals with the conspiracy to assassinate Caesar. Catullus writes broadsides attacking him, and Brutus and Cassius plain the actual murder. The novel closes with a description of the historical assassination borrowed from Suetonius.”

Donald Heiney
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(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 311

Michael Hollister (2015)