Reading guide/study questions – Mahabharata

The first introduction to our text is by [Wendy Doniger](https://divinity.uchicago.edu/wendy-doniger). Doniger created a firestorm, and was sued in Indian court for her 2009 book, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (Penguin). Her publisher lost the case and [destroyed all copies of the book in India](ttps://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/feb/12/wendy-doniger-book-hinduism-penguin-hindus). Why did this happen? You can learn more about the politics of India and its [Hindu nationalist movement](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/aparna-pande/secular-india-v-hindu-nat_b_6397778.html) through many sites on the internet. India’s current prime minister, Narendra Modi, leads the Bharatiya Janata Party, which is the Hindu nationalist party. Modi is on Twitter, if you’re interested: @narendramodi).

Our version of the *Mahabharata* comes from R.K. Narayan, called “India’s greatest writer” by the [*Manchester Guardian*](https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/may/14/guardianobituaries.books). Famous as a novelist, Narayan produced – as Wendy Doniger points out in her introduction – a version of the *Mahabharata* for English readers. Narayan’s introduction to our text, like Doniger’s, reminds us that the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* is 100,000 lines long. We have in our hands a version but, were we living in India, we would know these stories. We would likely sing, in Sanskrit, the opening lines of the *Bhagavad-Gita* (a portion of the *Mahabharata*, condensed into a few pages in our translation, starting on page 147) -- and not know how we learned it.

Our text has 16 chapters and an epilogue. Note the help Narayan gives us with a list of characters and concepts. Do try to speak these aloud. Among the challenges of this text is its "nesting box" structure: Vyasa himself is both poet and actor in the epic. What effect does such fabulation have on the story? What does it mean to become a hero? A god? How does the Pandavan rule compare with Gilgamesh's? [Dharma](https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/dharma-hinduism) and [karma](https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/essays/karma-hinduism) are central ideas for this text, and they defy definition. But we still must try. Are stories the best way to explore the challenges of dharma and karma?

Choose the incident in the *Mahabharata* that most disturbs you and explore what makes it challenge you. We will want to talk about the dice game in class, and we’ll also have a look at the [Bhagavad-Gita](https://www.bhagavad-gita.us/summary-of-the-bhagavad-gita/) to fill out Narayan’s raising of it. You can see from [this page](http://www.bhagavad-gita.org/) that there’s more commentary on the Bhagavad-Gita than we could approach in a lifetime. Perhaps [this page](https://www.bhagavad-gita.us/) is more approachable, yet the text’s overwhelming nature is part of its point for us. Our goal is to think about the meaning of the story literarily and as central to the epic’s meaning.