

The Ramayana in Literature and the Arts

October 11 and 18, 2026

Recommended for purchase:

The Rāmāyaṇa of Vālmīki: The Complete English Translation. Robert P. Goldman and Sally J. Sutherland Goldman, eds. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2021.

The Rama Epic: Hero, Heroine, Ally, Foe. Forrest McGill, ed. San Francisco: Asian Art Museum. 2016.

(Both are available in the Asian Art Museum store.)

General readings:

Ramayana of Valmiki: 3-43

Note the extensive glossary at the end. You will find it very useful because the text is filled with unfamiliar terms, and the main characters are called by a variety of names and epithets.

The Rama Epic: 23-35; 41; 101-117; 147-163; 199-213

For suggestions for further reading, see *Ramayana of Valmiki*, pp. 870-871. *The Rama Epic* has a very extensive bibliography, if you want to dive even deeper.

Readings by key turning point:

(Note: when there are gaps in the assigned page ranges, it is to skip over digressions that are not pertinent for the course.)

October 11

Rama is sent into exile as a result of machinations within the royal family

Ramayana of Valmiki: 138-180

Ravana kidnaps Sita to possess her and to punish Rama for harming Shurpanakha

Ramayana of Valmiki: 284-286; 299-301; 303-304; 307-327

Rama forges an alliance with Sugriva in return for help in finding Sita

Ramayana of Valmiki: 345-347; 353-361; 366-372; 398-406

October 18

Rama defeats and kills Ravana

Ramayana of Valmiki: read 695-699; skim 579-694 to get a sense of the many battles leading up to the climactic one between Rama and Ravana

Sita undergoes a trial by fire when her faithfulness to Rama is questioned

Ramayana of Valmiki: 706-711; 723-727

Important facts to keep in mind:

Rama is divine (an incarnation of Vishnu) but doesn't know this.

Demons (rakshasas and rakshasis) have the power to change shape at will.

So do the nobles of the monkey world. Furthermore, Hanuman can leap gigantic distances.

We will have discussions in class. To prepare, ponder these questions:

- Why is each “turning point” a turning point? How might things have changed if certain characters had made different decisions? (For example, what if Rama had not dutifully agreed to go into exile for fourteen years? What if Rama and Lakshmana had driven Shurpanakha away without disfiguring her? What if Lakshmana had not been persuaded by Sita to disobey Rama's order to stay with her?)
- What, from our best understanding of the text, AND from our modern point of view, are the strengths and weaknesses of the main characters?
- How does Rama's controversial intervention in the struggle between the monkey rivals Sugriva and Valin seem to us? What were Rama's motives?
- How, using our ancient eyes and our modern eyes, do we see Sita's refusal to be rescued by Hanuman because she thought it improper to be touched by a male other than her husband, when if she had consented, a devastating war might have been avoided?
- How, again using our ancient eyes and our modern eyes, do we see Rama's denunciation of Sita when she has been rescued, and his subsequent explanatory story?
- Think about the instances of shape-shifting and of illusions. The example of the demon Maricha taking the shape of a golden deer is fairly straight forward. But what about the fact that Rama (we are told), in order to be able to kill Ravana, must suffer or *appear* to suffer?
- The whole epic, we are to understand, is about the struggle between good, duty, and righteousness on the one hand and evil, licentiousness, and immorality on the

other. With our ancient eyes and our modern eyes, how does this look? (See *Rama Epic*, p. 32.

Some key characters important for the course

Bharata	One of Rama's brothers, who rules Ayodhya as Rama's regent
Dasharatha	King of Ayodhya and father of Rama, Bharata, and Lakshmana
Hanuman	Brave and wise monkey ally of Rama; a god in his own right
Jatayus	Vulture king who tries to prevent Ravana from abducting Sita and is dealt a mortal blow
Kaikeyi	Mother of Bharata, who, egged on by a maidservant, persuades Dasharatha to make Bharata, rather than Rama, the prince regent
Lakshmana	Rama's devoted brother
Mandodari	Admirable chief wife of Ravana
Maricha	Demon whom Ravana orders to take the form of a golden deer to lure Rama away from Sita
Rama	Heroic and righteous prince; a god, as an incarnation of Vishnu
Sita	Faithful and virtuous wife of Rama; a goddess, associated with Lakshmi
Ravana	Demon king of Lanka and abductor of Sita
Shurpanakha	Demoness who makes advances to Rama and Lakshmana and is rebuffed. She threatened Sita; Lakshmana cuts off her nose and ears
Sugriva	Monkey king assisted in taking the throne by Rama in exchange for his help in recovering Sita
Valin	Monkey king killed by Rama to enable Sugriva to reclaim the throne