

A Multiple-Choice Test for Classicists

Mark Anthony Turnage's new opera *Greek* is based on *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles. One of his three Theban tragedies, Sophocles' tale reads like a plot for CSI: Thebes, opening with the new king of Thebes on the hunt to find the murderer of old King Laius. If he can do so, he'll end the plague ravaging Thebes.

BUT DO YOU KNOW?

- Oedipus has just unwittingly fulfilled a horrifying two-part prophecy. Why does he have no idea that he is descended from the royal line of Thebes?
 - His grandfather father placed him and his mother in a wooden box and cast them into the Aegean Sea.
 - His mother placed him in a floating basket, later found in river rushes.
 - He was born disfigured, exorcised, and then left on a foundling bed in the city.
 - His father bound his feet and ordered his mother to kill him, but he was rescued by a shepherd who named him "swollen feet."
- Who was the father of Oedipus?
 - Zeus
 - Poseidon
 - Laius
 - Acrisius
- Sophocles tells us that Oedipus had solved the riddle of the Sphinx (the gatekeeper of Thebes), but doesn't tell specify the riddle. What do later sources tell us?
 - Thirty white horses on a red hill: first they champ, then they stamp, then they stand still.
 - What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three in the evening?
 - What we caught, we threw away; what we didn't catch, we kept.
 - Why is a raven like a writing desk?
- What happens after Oedipus solves the Sphinx's riddle?
 - He escapes through a tunnel under the mountain.
 - Athena gives him a bridle to tame the winged horse Pegasus.
 - He frees the land from a plague due to "religious pollution" and marries the widowed queen.
 - Hermes gives him a golden apple to bestow upon "the most beautiful."
- What does Sophocles' chorus intone after Oedipus discovers he has fulfilled the prophecy?
 - Love, personified by Aphrodite, overcomes everyone.
 - All this suffering and violence was for the sake of women.
 - Old age causes men to return to childishness.
 - Even a great man can be felled by fate.

ANSWERS

1. **D.** Oedi - pus means “swollen feet,” and the character is named Eddy in Turnage’s opera. *A. is Perseus, B. is Moses, C. is Quasimodo*
2. **C.** Lauiis, King of Thebes, who he kills over a dispute about right-of-way for his chariot.
3. **B.** Answer: man. *A. is Tolkien (teeth), C. is Homer (lice), D. is Lewis Carroll*
4. **C.** He marries his own mother, Jocasta.
A. is from The Hobbit, B. is Bellorophon, D. is Paris
5. **D.**, but Berkoff’s updating of the play in *Greek* radically changes this ending. *A. is from Antigone (Sophocles), B./C. are from Agamemnon (Aeschylus)*