

Riddles of the Rhyming Sphinx



by Jofinathan M. Richards
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"What walks upon four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three legs at night?" Traditionally, this is the Riddle of the Sphinx. According to classical mythology, those unlucky enough to encounter the sphinx were devoured unless they could successfully answer her riddle. The sphinx dined upon many an unfortunate traveler before Oedipus correctly solved the riddle; the sphinx then killed herself in anguish. The answer, incidentally, is "a man"—who crawls on all fours as a baby (during the "morning" of his life), walks erect on two legs thereafter until, as an old man, he uses a cane (which comprises the third "leg").

The AD&D® game contains four main types of sphinx. One of these, the gynosphinx, is an avid collector of riddles, and she represents the type of sphinx encountered by young Oedipus. When a party encounters a gynosphinx, she might demand that they correctly answer one of her riddles, either to measure their worth or allow them to “earn” the right to pass by without harm. In any event, when roleplaying a gynosphinx encounter, it’s best for the Dungeon Master to have a riddle or two handy. While any good library should have several books of riddles, many of these are of the “joke” variety; a gynosphinx’s riddles, on the other hand, should lean more toward the “brain-teaser” variety. After all, a gynosphinx takes her riddles seriously. They’re her stock in trade, and they might represent the difference between eating her fill of foolish adventurers or

going hungry for awhile. (Fortunately, gynosphinxes are honorable; if a party correctly answers her riddle, she’s honor bound not to attack them no matter how hungry she is.)

Most gynosphinxes prefer speaking their riddles aloud and have dozens if not hundreds of riddles memorized for possible use. (They do have a “genius” Intelligence rating, after all.) However, some riddles can be figured out only if they are seen written out, and in the spirit of fairness, a gynosphinx usually provides a written copy of riddles such as these. The DM can have the gynosphinx sketch the riddle out in the sand, produce a copy of the riddle that she’s laboriously scratched into a slab of soft sandstone with her claw, or perhaps a written copy that she’s had an underling transcribe with ink and paper. (A kind DM might even allow a PC to “buy” his life by transcribing a number

of the gynosphinx’s riddles onto paper if he’s unable to solve her riddle himself.)

In addition, a gynosphinx’s riddles can often be incorporated into a mechanical door or trap. If the answer to the riddle is a letter or number, it might be possible to open the hidden door or disarm the trap by pressing the stone on which that character appears. This concept would be frequently employed within a gynosphinx’s lair and makes it possible for the PCs to match their wits against the gynosphinx’s riddles without necessarily encountering the creature herself.

With all of this in mind, here are twenty riddles suitable for gynosphinx use. While gynosphinx riddles need not always rhyme, a rhyming riddle adds an extra bit of style or panache, and gynosphinxes pride themselves upon their general classiness. The answers to each riddle appear at the end.



1

*You can see me in darkness but never in light.
I am present in daytime but absent in night.
In the deepest of shadows I stand in plain sight.*

What am I?

2

*You can find me on a human, or a halfling, or a gnome.
You can find me in a glass of beer, with frothy, sudsy foam.
You can find me in a cabbage patch, growing in the loam.*

What am I?

3

*You can find me on a human, or a halfling, or a gnome.
I am present in a wizard’s wand, but not upon his tome.
I am on a half-orc’s hand axe, but not a gray elf’s comb.*

What am I?

4

*Man has but one, ettins two,
Cerberus has three.
Pyrohydrae have only four.
Now tell me, what could that be?*

5

*Man has but one, as does an elf.
Woman has two, all by herself.
And when it comes to the minotaur,
He has not one, or two, but four.*

What is it?

6

*I have no sword, I have no spear
Yet rule a horde that many fear.
My soldiers fight with wicked sting;
I rule with might, yet am no king.*

What am I?

7

*A snyad is said to be sandy of skin.
An ogre enjoys all the gore that he’s in.
A skeleton definitely is not sleek,
But a stone giant’s tasting one now as we speak.
The derro have order, and maybe you’ve heard
That in matters of chaos, that drow is the word.
So which kind of monster, if you follow the rule,
Can best be described as a “toughy,” you fool?*

8

*Join each of the following, and so form a link:
The ocean, a sight-orb, a kind of a drink.
To that add a question but one word in length,
Then read me the answer, if your mind has the strength.*

9

*The color of a dragon’s scales,
Certain flowers; certain whales.
The moon is sometimes of this hue,
And so is melancholy, too.*

What am I?



10

He dreamt he soared above the earth
And there he met his peer.
It was his beau, and she was worth
All things that he held dear.
And in the androsphinx's dream
He found what battle lacks.
For combat, although it might seem
Like fun, can overtax.
But since it's battle humans make,
A narrow view, it seems,
Name the five weapons you would take
From the androsphinx's dreams.

11

It's in the eye of the beholder, it's in the presence of a lich.
Many times it will be found within the spellbook of a witch.
It's in the aura of a dragon when it finally comes of age.
It's what comes to visit when you first speak on the stage.
What is it?

12

Abracadabra and Alakazam,
Hocus, Pocus, Addaboombam.
Take just a second on each magic word
And name me the substance that those words conjured.

13

Take the colors of the rainbow, and multiply by three.
Subtract from that past tense of eat, it's easy as can be.
Now add a three-digit number, a synonym for "ick,"
Add three more; divide it by the corners on a brick.
What number am I?

14

Search the whole world over, you won't find me on land.
But in the oceans and the seas you'll find that I'm at hand.
You can search the phlogiston, you'll never see me once.
But in the void of airless space I'm found by he who hunts.
Seek me on a mountain-top, you'll never find a trace.
And yet I'm present in each member of the human race.
What am I?

15

It's with me when I take a seat,
And take a load off of my feet.
But I no sooner stand and then
I find that it is gone again.
What is it?

16

Begin with the days in a dozen fortnights.
Divide by the number of eyes in two wights.
To that add the legs of three bees a'buzzin'.
And finally, subtract a good baker's dozen.
What number am I?

17

My first is in Ghost, but isn't in Ghoul.
My second's in Spirit, but isn't in Stool.
My third is in Death, but not in Good Deal.
My fourth is in Lich, but isn't in Heal.
My fifth is in Haunt, but isn't in Tooth.
My sixth is in Onyx, but isn't in Youth.
What am I?

The Old Bait and Switch

One of the nice things about using riddles in adventures is they cross all boundaries: A player with a 1st-level fighter has the same chance to solve a riddle as a player running a 20th-level wizard with an 18 Intelligence. No special character class abilities are needed, and there are no racial modifiers. Players of any age can come up with the solution to a riddle.

Unfortunately, not everyone is good at riddles. It's frustrating for players to know that it's important for their party to solve a particular riddle when they have no clue what the answer is. As a last resort, a kind DM might allow each PC to make an Intelligence check to determine whether the character can figure out the riddle's solution even if the player can't, but this isn't as satisfying for the players as when they can solve the riddle themselves.

To help such players, here are two riddles patterned after riddle #8. If the players are exposed to riddle #8, the next time a riddle is needed in an adventure, the DM can spring one of these on them and they should be able to figure it out for themselves, after having seen the trick involved. Likewise, any other riddles can be made easier by introducing the trick in an earlier riddle, then presenting the PCs with a similar riddle. Think of how smart they'll feel!

A

Begin with a bird that has feathers of blue.
Add to it a syllable said in surprise.
To that add a yellow-striped insect that flies,
Then read me the word that is formed when you do.

B

Begin with ten people lined up at the gate.
Add to it the curly-haired mountain ram's mate.
Add a pirate's okay and a vegetable green,
Then read me the word, if you know which I mean.

A. "Bird that has feathers of blue" = "jay" = "j" syllable said in surprise" = "Oh!" = "O" yellow-striped insect that flies" = "bee" = "B." The answer is "job."
B. "Ten people lined up at the gate" = "queue" = "Q;" "curly-haired mountain ram's mate" = "ewe" = "U;" "pirate's okay" = "aye" = "T;" "vegetable green" = "pea" = "P." The answer is "quip."

Answers

Answers

A. "Bird that has feathers of blue" = "jay" = "J;" "syllable said in surprise" = "Oh!" = "O;" "yellow-striped insect that flies" = "bee" = "B." The answer is "job."

B. "Ten people lined up at the gate" = "queue" = "Q;" "curly-haired mountain ram's mate" = "ewe" = "U;" "pirate's okay" = "aye" = "I;" "vegetable green" = "pea" = "P." The answer is "quip."



18

You see before you four of these,
Of these there is no lack.
I grant one of five minutes' time,
Then you become my snack.
What is it?

19

First is O, then is T, then is T again.
After that we have two F's, that's F as found in "fen."
Next in line there is an S, and after that another.
Finally we have an E, but this one has no brother.
O, T, T, F, F, S, S, and finally an E.
The next to fall in sequence, can you state what that will be?

20

My first is in Key, but isn't in Eye.
My second's in Ill, but isn't in Lye.
My next two are found in Lid, not Bird.
And now we must pause and start a second word.
My fifth is in May, but isn't in Say.
My sixth is in He, but isn't in Hay.
What phrase am I?

I'm a freelancer whose work can be seen
In both DUNGEON® Adventures and DRAGON® Magazine.
My "Challenge of Champions" series has grown,
And in DRAGON, it's mostly for "Ecologies" I'm known.
Who am I?

Answers

10. The five weapons are as follows: a sword, a spear, a bow, a battle-axe, and an arrow. The weapons are taken from the following lines of the riddle (called "The Androsphinx's Dream"): line 1: "soared" = "sword"; line 2: "his peer" = "this spear"; line 3: "deau" = "bow"; line 6: "bat-tle lacks" = "battle-axe"; line 10: "a narrow" = "an arrow."
11. "Fear." One of a beholder's eyes shoots a fear ray; the auras of both liches and dragons can cause magical fear. *fear* is a 4th-level wizard spell; stage fright is a form of fear.
12. The vital clue to this riddle is "take just a second." By taking the second letter from the words "Abracadabra," "Alakazam," "Hocus," "Pocus," and "Addaboombam," the word "blood" is formed; thus "blood" is the name of the substance "conjured" by the magic words.
13. This is a simple math problem involving some word play. There are seven colors in a rainbow (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet). "Past tense of eat" is another way to say "ate," which is a homonym for "eight." The synonym for "lack" is "gross." In measurement terms, a gross is a 12 dozen, or 144. A brick, as a six-sided structure, has 8 corners. Thus, $7 \times 3 = 21$; $21 - 1 = 20$. The answers are "20."
14. The letter "e," which is present in "oceans," "seas," "void of address space," and "each member of the human race," yet absent in "land," "phlogiston," and "mountain-top."
15. "Your lap," which is with you when you sit but vanishes (by definition) when you stand. This is a simple math problem, although knowledge of measurements is required. There are 14 days in a fortnight, so a dozen fortnights is 168 days. A wight has two eyes, so two wights have four. Bees, as insects, have six legs apiece, so three bees have a total of 18 legs. Finally, a baker's dozen is 13. Thus, $168 \div 4 = 42$; $42 + 18 = 60$; $60 - 13 = 47$. The answer is "47."
17. The answer to this one is "sphinx."
18. This riddle is especially popular among gynosphinxes; they enjoy the fact that the answer to their riddle is starting the word "sphinx" herself. Note that this riddle works only when the gynosphinx herself is present and doesn't arrive at the solution before she attacks.)
19. The sequence O-T-T-F-F-S-S-E is the first letter of the numbers one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, and eight; thus the answer is "N," the first letter of the number nine.
20. This final riddle is a set-up, used for when the gynosphinx's hunger outweighs her sense of fair play. A close examination of the words used in the puzzle shows that there is only one choice for each of the six letters in the two-word phrase. When put in order, the answer is: "kill me." If the answer is spoken the gynosphinx, having kindly been given permission by her potential prey, jumps to the attack! (Clever players will have their PCs state the answer some-thing like this: "The answer to your riddle is the phrase 'kill me,' but in no way do I authorize this procedure; I hold you to your promise of safe passage upon successfully answering your riddle." The gynosphinx won't like it, but when pointed out to her in this fashion, her honor and sense of fair play will win out over her hunger.)

1. There are two possible answers to this riddle: the letter "a" or the letter "d." Both appear in "darkness," "daytime," and "shade." Besides the body part, it refers to both a head of foam and a head of cabbage. The letter "n," which is present in the words "human," "halling," "gnome," "wand," and "half-orc's hand axe," but not in the words "tome" or "gray elf's comb," although the obvious answers seems to be "heads," pyrohydrae have either seven or eight heads, not four. The correct answer is "syllables."
2. "A queen bee." Simply "a queen," a prince, and the like are not possible answers because of the phrase "wicked sting" in the third line: most human soldiers use swords, spears, pikes, or similar weapons, but not stings.
3. "An otyugh." The "rule" eluded to in the riddle is to use anagrams: "synad" is an anagram of "sandy"; similarly, "gore" and "gore" are anagrams, as are "skelton" and "not seek," "stone giant" and "tasting one," "derro" and "order," and "drow" and "word."
4. This riddle requires some deciphering. "Ocean" = "sea" = "C"; "Sight-ort" = "eye" = "I"; "A kind of a drink" = "tea" = "T"; "A question but one word in length" = "Why?" = "Y." Thus, the answer is "city."
5. The color blue. The riddle refers to blue dragons, numerous blue-colored flowers, blue whales, "once in a blue moon," and the phrase "feeling blue" to denote sadness.

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2. “A head.” Besides the body part, it refers to both a head of foam and a head of cabbage.

3. The letter “n,” which is present in the words “human,” “halfling,” “gnome,” “wand,” and “half-orc’s hand axe,” but not in the words “tome” or “gray elf’s comb.”

4. Although the obvious answer seems to be “heads,” pyrohydrae have either seven or eight heads, not four. The correct answer is “syllables.”

5. “Vowels.”

6. “A queen bee.” Simply “a queen,” “a prince,” and the like are not possible answers because of the phrase “wicked sting” in the third line: most human soldiers use swords, spears, pikes, or similar weapons, but not stings.

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18. This riddle is especially popular among gynosphinxes; they enjoy the fact that the answer to their riddle is staring the would-be riddle-solver in the face. (The gynosphinx herself has four paws and grants a pause of five minutes for the victims to arrive at the solution before she attacks.) Note that this riddle works only when the gynosphinx herself is present and doesn’t work well when members of other races recite it (unless they also have four paws).

19. The sequence O-T-T-F-F-S-S-E is the first letter of the numbers one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, and eight; thus the answer is “N,” the first letter of the number nine.

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