

ERIK THE MULE GOES ON TRIAL (KS2/3)

Concept – Human Responsibility

Re-stage the court case, with judge, prosecution, defence, jury and other characters – both human and animal. Afterwards, hot-seat each main character for their impressions.

In Medieval Christian Europe, animals were sometimes considered to be as responsible and accountable for their actions as human beings, since all had value to God. (e.g., Deut:22.6) This 'legal responsibility' led to the curious phenomenon of 'animal trials'. Creatures like Erik could even have their own lawyer appointed. Is this quaint . . . or enlightened?

The courtroom was silent as the judge delivered his verdict, but Erik wasn't listening. He wasn't even paying attention when his own lawyer was speaking up for him. But then . . . Erik was a mule. The judge looked at him sternly.

"The charges against Erik the mule are serious. According to witnesses, it is clear that last Tuesday, he viciously attacked Mr Frederick Miller, his employer. He kicked Mr Miller hard, causing him actual injuries, and then proceeded to destroy the cart he was pulling which was also his employer's property. Erik then ran off, leaving the scene of the crime, and was later found asleep under a hedge!" There was some laughter in court at this, until the judge frowned and continued.

"We have heard that Erik was often beaten by his master, but this is no real defence. By the

authority given me by God and the Crown, I find Erik guilty as charged, and sentence him to work for his master an extra hour every day to grind corn until Michaelmas, as compensation for the injury and damage caused." He banged his gavel. "Case dismissed." Justice had been done. There was a lot of murmuring and nodding around the court as Erik's master led him away.

A week later there was more news. One night, Erik the mule had kicked open the stable door at Mr Miller's farm and run away! He was never seen again!



Discuss how this medieval attitude to animals compares with modern ideas of criminal responsibility (e.g., dangerous dogs).

Are there modern issues where you think animals would benefit from being given their own lawyers? What effect would this have?

How would Erik plead his case if he had the power of speech? Hot-seat him, then write his testimony, giving reasons why he acted the way he did, and why he should not be punished.