

The Mousetrap  
In Memory of Louis Marin

STEPHEN GREENBLATT

For at least a thousand years the Passover Seder has included a midrash about four sons, representing four distinct attitudes toward the evening's ritual and toward the religious community it helps to define.<sup>1</sup> To the son who does not know how to ask—who is too young or too ignorant to seek enlightenment—the father must take the initiative and begin the story, as he is enjoined to do in the book of Exodus: “This is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth from Egypt.” To the simple son who can at least notice that something unusual is happening but can only ask, “Ma zot?”—“what is this?”—the father moves from the personal to the collective and adds a crucial bit of information: “With a strong hand did God bring us out from Egypt, from the House of Bondage.” But when I was a child, all of the interest focussed on the first two sons and, more specifically, on which role—for these passages are traditionally read aloud by participants at the Seder—would be assigned to me and which to my older brother. The wise son recites a question taken from Deuteronomy (6:20) “What mean the testimonies, and the statutes, and the ordinances, which the Lord our God hath commanded you?” The wicked son recites a question taken from Exodus (12:26): “What mean you by this service?”