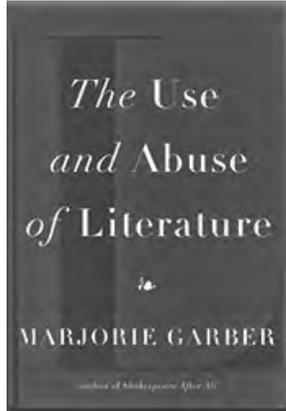


James Mellon

The Use and Abuse of Literature

by Marjorie Garber. New York: Pantheon Books, 2011.

Pp. x. 320.



Marjorie Garber's *The Use and Abuse of Literature* is an unusual book in that it can be read for enjoyment or for education by the student, the academic or the general reader. Garber adopts a broad and flexible sense of what constitutes "literature": pointing out again and again that historically genres like the play, the novel and, more recently, the graphic novel (about which opinion is divided) have come to be considered what is characterized as "literature". Garber can even at times be a little frustrating to read in her reluctance to speak more forcefully about her own sense of the directions she would prefer to see literature take. Her concluding chapter, after all, is entitled "The Impossibility of Closure", and the concluding section of that chapter is "In Which Nothing is Concluded". Garber maintains that "Because no interpretation of literature is 'final' or 'definitive', literary study, like literature, is a process, rather than a product." (p. 259) She argues that ". . . one of the defining characteristics of literature and literary study is to open questions, not to close them." (p. 259)

The thrust of her argument is that, in regard to claims to status as literature, what matters is not so much what is said but how it is said. Garber asserts that "What literary scholars can offer to the readers of all texts (not just those explicitly certified

as literature) is a way of *asking literary questions*: questions about the *way* something means, rather than *what* it means, or even *why*.”(p. 57) Garber’s disdain of closure applies, as well, to her sense of the role of literary criticism. Even works regarded as classic, and she accepts that the reputation of works may vary from one era to another, reflect their own eras but, nevertheless, are in some sense always contemporary, she suggests, in that the process of interpretation itself resists closure. Garber observes that “. . . reading any literary work involves a kind of stereo-optical vision: one eye on the image of the past, the other on the present, the two eyes then combining them into a vivid single picture.”(p. 167)

The general reader will find her discussion engaging. She frequently draws on the history of literature to support her points but she typically refers to works with which many readers will already have some familiarity. Without intimidating the general reader, she has authored a work that both students and academics in the study of literature will find interesting.