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Peeking into Closets: A Review of Danielle Bobker's The Closet: The Eighteenth-Century Architecture of Intimacy

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PEEKING INTO CLOSETS: A REVIEW OF DANIELLE BOBKER'S *THE CLOSET: THE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ARCHITECTURE OF INTIMACY*

Karenza Sutton-Bennett

In *The Closet: The Eighteenth-Century Architecture of Intimacy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), Danielle Bobker brings a fresh perspective to the field of culture studies and literary criticism in her examination of the different uses of the term "closet" in the long eighteenth century. Examining descriptions of closets in diaries and household manuals, as well as literary representations of closets in periodicals, poetry, and novels, she considers how the rising popularity of the different iterations of closets were signs of increasing wealth and consumerism of the emerging middle class. She answers the call to historicize the tantalizing (and sometimes grotesque) details behind the rise of the closet in both public and private settings, then expands her scope to what we would consider untraditional closets—textual closets and moving closets. Finally, she turns her attention to the queer associations of closets in the modern world. While previous literary and history scholarship have focused on the uses of dressing rooms or sleeping closets, Bobker's book digs deeper to examine the sometimes surprising relationships between men and women and their closets and how closets held secrets that were meant either to be shared with a select audience or kept hidden away from all but their owner.

Each chapter is prefaced with a specific eighteenth-century use of the term "closet" and then moves on to a particular case study. In sum: Chapter 1 discusses the heightened popularity of closets in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Chapter 2 delves into the often sexual uses of closets by royalty. Chapter 3 considers the unappetizing mechanics of water closets while also highlighting the potentially arousing nature of public urination and defecation. Chapters 4 and 5 turn to unusual closets: textual closets, such as letters, diaries, and theater ticket stubs, among other items, and moving closets (i.e., coaches), which held secrets

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of their passengers' behaviors, such as exhibitionism and sexual exploits. The thread of sexuality interwoven in each chapter culminates in a coda focused on contemporary representations of men and women figuratively coming out of the closet to reveal their sexual preferences.

At the start of each chapter, Bobker entices her readers with teaser discussions of notable diarist Samuel Pepys's experiences in closets. Pepys participates in material culture by recording his public and private interactions in his own closets and in those of others. These chapter introductions act as mini textual closets, inviting readers to consider textual constructional forms. "Rooms for Improvement," the prefatory text for Bobker's first chapter, introduces readers to the three closets in Pepys's house, all decorated befitting a king. Here, in public performances for his guests, Pepys demonstrated his wealth and knowledge. Modeled after Whitehall Palace and scrupulously decorated, Pepys's closets, unlike dressing rooms and sleeping closets, were meant to be shown, and they gave him a great sense of pride. Bobker explains, "Pepys recognized the importance of his performance in this setting—was pleased when his meticulous record-keeping and managerial insights allowed him to shine, and only occasionally disappointed when the topic of conversation moved beyond his expertise" (2). There was a gift economy attached to closets; having one's gift to the king or other notable figures displayed in their closets was a great privilege, which in turn boosted the reputation of the gift giver. For that reason, Pepys was careful about who he invited into his own personal closet. But what was kept in a closet was just as important as who was allowed to visit the closet, Bobker tells us. Pepys would judge the contents of a closet he visited in relation to the owner's "personal qualities" (4). His own closets' contents, which included not only gifts from notable figures but also such oddities as a "ball-sized stone" removed from his bladder, were all designed to encourage others to pay a visit (8).

As private closets in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century homes increasingly became a place to relax and entertain guests, their popularity expanded from royal houses to more modest dwellings, including tiny cottages. Bobker provides a detailed analysis of the different architectural designs of closets, noting that the term "closet" could refer to rooms or freestanding cabinets, and she describes the contents of closets, connecting them to how they represented the growing wealth of the middle class. In some cases, closets would house purchased objects, but thanks to surging interest in natural philosophy, they might also display objects collected from nature, such as the carcass of a large animal, or an insect, or a bird's nest.

Closets were used for a variety of purposes: business meetings, letter writing, reading, an oratory for a family to pray together or to perform

dramas. They functioned as both a private and public sphere, a place of solitude and a place to entertain. Turning to the public closets of the monarchy, Bobker notes that the "political and cultural power of the court and aristocracy was unraveling, private cabinets of curiosity were increasingly widely displayed, and many more nonelite people—including some who were less-connected and less wealthy than Pepys in his prime—visited, coveted, and acquired private rooms" (31). Opening up a monarch's closet was key to the monarchy's survival. Bobker ends this first chapter with a discussion of how literary and cultural historians have recorded textual evidence of closets, including lists of closet contents, architectural blueprints, and paintings of closets.

In "Favor," the prefatory material to chapter 2, Bobker builds on her analysis of who might gain admittance into the inner sanctums of a monarch's closets—and how. Pepys, we learn, keeps careful records of secrets he hears through "private courtly alliances," allowing him to gain increased favor with King Charles II (41). His connections and detailed notes, along with the close monitoring of his own reputation, gave Pepys access to the monarch's inner circle where he was considered one of the king's favorites. "Favorites," explains Bobker, "rose from disparate backgrounds and could play many different roles: servant, counselor, manager, advisor, apprentice, secretary, spokesperson, confidant, spy of lover" (46). The choice of a favorite, regardless of gender, was always political, and monarchs relied on favorites to be their confidants, companions, and, in some cases, lovers.

Closets, then, according to Bobker, were not just a physical space but also a personal space in one's heart. Because intimate relationships between royal women and their favorites (whether long-term companions or onetime interests) needed to be conducted in secret, they often took place behind closed doors, turning dressing rooms and bathing closets into potential zones of pleasure. "[I]n the early modern period and throughout the eighteenth century," Bobker writes, "the bath evokes images of nameless female captives, who, rendered pliant by steam and heat, fall into one another's arms thoughtlessly, performing their inconsequentiality in fleeting, meaningless pleasures" (68). The secret histories (either real or imagined) that depicted the steamy details of the relationships between royals and their favorites led to an uptick in the print market, giving a larger percentage of the public a voyeuristic glimpse into the physical and emotional closets of the monarchy.

The most compelling chapter of the book is the third, "Lady Acheson's Privy for Two," wherein Bobker depicts private and public water closets. Describing Pepys's private "house of office" (76), where he did his so-called

business, Bobker notes that Pepys kept a log of his defecations. He also documented the grotesque details of cleaning out his office, reporting how his neighbor's office, when not cleaned out regularly, would back up into his attic. Waste management, observes Bobker, was a delicate negotiation between houses in London.

The fixation on excrement in the eighteenth century extends to such authors as Jonathan Swift, who wrote "scatological poem[s] . . . that gave him a reputation of being obsessed with bodily waste" (79–80). This preoccupation coincided with the movement away from the country house and "earth closets" and toward a desire to create indoor water closets in urban houses. "The term water closet," according to Bobker, "reflected both a long-standing interest in designing out-of-the-way interiors especially for excretion, and the modern plumbing systems that could minimize their smell—in theory, without any additional human labor" (81). The desire for privacy came to the fore when worries mounted over the possibility of passions becoming inflamed by seeing a member of the opposite sex defecating or urinating in outdoor shared privies. That these raised passions might lead to rape or adultery are reflected in Swift's panegyric poem "Lady's Dressing Room" and inspired the urination scene in *Gulliver's Travels*.

In chapter 4, "Miss C—y's Cabinet of Curiosities," Bobker takes up the concern over elite secrets being published in textual closets, which might comprise not only personal collections of notes, receipts, and recipes but also, in the case of cabinets of love, a written record of private sexual activity (in the sixteenth century, notes Bobker, the term "cabinet" was a euphemism for genitals, which should not be kept open but under lock and key [137]). Pepys's careful management of his closet and the invitations to visit it that he extended to others illustrate his desire to keep his prized possessions from being pocketed by guests and to protect his own reputation.

In the last chapter, Bobker discusses moving closets, or private and public coaches. These coaches, as with in-home closets, were at first reserved for the elite but, with the rise of wealth, spread to other classes, and their depiction in literary works, such as Laurence Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, helped increase their popularity. Pepys viewed coaches, which served as "warm-ups" for private conversation or rendezvous, as erotic spaces, in the same way he considered closets as places for "sexual entitlement" (149). Though considered a type of public sphere, coaches were lacking in the "diversions" of a shared coffee or alcoholic beverage to help "smooth" the social awkwardness of these chance encounters (170). Sitting closely in shared tight spaces with strangers, suggests Bobker, led to arousal and

sexual exploits in the semiprivate spaces of the moving closet—continuing the theme of sexual adventurism and spectatorship of (semi-)private and public closets in the eighteenth century.

The book's coda fast-forwards to the twentieth century with a discussion of the queer closet and the idea of revealing one's sexual preferences and desires by coming out of a closet. Bobker links the secret sexual rendezvous in the eighteenth-century water closet, bathing closet, and moving closet to the virtual and face-to-face intimacies of the queer closet.

The Closet is a delightful read that draws light on the different uses and connotations of the word "closet" in the eighteenth century and beyond. Bobker's detailed analysis of the literary and cultural significance of the closet in relation to the development of the emerging middle class and the public spheres helps scholars understand the intimacy and ceremony hidden within. Bobker's work is a natural expansion of Tita Chico's analysis of dressing rooms in *Designing Women: The Dressing Room in Eighteenth-Century English Literature and Culture* as it extends the definition and use of the closets. The thread of sexuality Bobker embroiders through her chapters makes the book a tantalizing read. My only minor criticism is that the extended epigraphs on Pepys at the start of each chapter left me wanting more, and it would have been interesting to see them more integrated into the chapters. For its clearness, close readings, and engagement with literary and cultural history, *The Closet* will find readers from both inside and outside the eighteenth-century field eager to read it.

Karenza Sutton-Bennett is an independent scholar whose doctorate is from University of Ottawa. Her dissertation is titled "The Female Guise: The Untold Story of Female Education in English Periodicals," and her research focuses on textual and visual representations of women learning in female-penned periodicals. Her research interests include the history of education, cultural studies, theater studies, and women's writing. She is the coeditor (with Kelly Plante) of the open-access digital edition of Charlotte Lennox's The Lady's Museum*; in 2023, the edition won the ASECS Women's Caucus Editing and Translation Fellowship. Karenza's publications include "Intellect versus Politeness: Charlotte Lennox and Women's Minds," published in the journal* Eighteenth-Century Fiction *and "Teaching the Lady's Museum and Sophia: Imperialism, Early Feminism, and Beyond," coauthored with Susan Carlile and published in* Aphra Behn Online.