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I

The Way In

The closet was to have a long and honourable history before descending to final ignominy as a large cupboard or a room for the housemaid's sink and mops.

—MARK GIROUARD¹

After dinner, to my closet, where abundance of mighty pretty discourse.

—SAMUEL PEPYS²

intimate, adj.

when two people are within each other[']s minds, without boundaries

—URBAN DICTIONARY³

How, and where, does social change become imaginable? In eighteenth-century Britain, one answer lay in the closet. *The Closet* argues that these marginal spaces were channels for some of the period's greatest ideological tensions and most complicated feelings, both immediately, in the practical issues owners faced everyday about whom to invite in and what sorts of obligations these invitations brought with them, and abstractly, as symbols both of traditional hierarchical relations, and of the possibility of leaving them behind. Liberal theories of modernity sometimes give the impression that notions of social equality and universal access to knowledge flourished alongside independent wealth in eighteenth-century Britain as an almost inevitable triumph of reason and democratic goodness. The eighteenth-century closet insists on a messier story.

This chapter sets out the terms and stakes of the book's new view of the closet as a fundamental vehicle of the shifting social imaginary. Currently, the dominant image of the eighteenth-century closet is that of a person alone, in the process of finding out that life is more than a set of duties to fulfill, that he—or perhaps she—has depths and limits to dis-

cover, values to uphold, tastes to refine. Thus the first move here is to survey the interdisciplinary terrain that has given us this composite image. In recent decades, literary and cultural historians have studied a wide variety of closet discourses and practices, generally in isolation, tending to highlight the rise of personal identity and psychological interiority in the context of increasing bourgeois domestic privacy. Though separately and together these studies have beautifully illuminated the contours and depths of the modern individual and the poetics of personal architecture, they have minimized the closet's social dimensions, its residual elitism, as well as the many continuities in closet uses and discourses. Preparing to fill these gaps throughout the book, the chapter's second section proposes that the intimacy of eighteenth-century closets comes into sharp focus only when we take their courtly public origins into account. The Restoration and eighteenth-century literature and language of the closet often pointed to the prospects of connection across status difference that had long been at the emotional core of this traditional public space: the original elitist protocols of alliance continued to send out a charge even as they were increasingly intercepted or outright rejected by actual closet occupants and the authors imagining them, making the interpersonal relations of the closet especially fraught. The third and final section of the chapter provides a conceptual frame for this affective complexity by considering how closet alliances both reinforce and challenge liberal accounts of social change. At a glance, the proliferation of intimate closets evinces the gradual emergence of horizontal social relations that liberal theorists emphasize. On closer inspection, however, eighteenth-century closets and closet rhetoric also become touchstones for the queer and feminist critique of this utopian master narrative, calling attention to many visceral obstacles to apparently inclusive models of access and connection.

THE MODERN PRIVATE CLOSET

Seventeenth-century transformations in domestic architecture and the growing value of privacy are implicitly or explicitly the ground zero of most studies of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century closets. Medieval and early modern house designs had ensured that people had space to practice their trades or, in the case of the royalty and peerage, ample room for hosting visitors. Architectural privacy was then defined negatively as withdrawal from the fundamental publicness of the household as a whole,

particularly withdrawal from elaborate communal dining rituals. Indeed, as Michael McKeon suggests, the mid-seventeenth-century coinage *drawing room* for “a private chamber attached to a more public room” illustrates the overlapping conceptual and architectural changes that eventually produced privacy as a distinctive and desirable experience: “The development of domestic architecture . . . may be imaginatively encapsulated in the transformation of the withdrawing room from a negative into a positive space, from a public absence to a private sort of presence, a process that was marked by idiomatic usage in the positivizing shift from ‘withdrawing room’ to ‘drawing room.’”⁴ In other words, beginning in the seventeenth century, homeowners began to enjoy relaxing by themselves without thinking of this experience simply as a break from or preparation for the truly vital experiences of entertaining guests, conducting business, or managing servants in some larger space on the other side of the wall.

Formal enfilade apartments, in which all rooms but the closet had other rooms leading off them, were giving way to double pile plans, in which hallways now made it possible to keep almost all of the rooms separate from one another and to minimize the intrusions of visitors or servants (figures 2 and 3). Lawrence Stone calls the advent of the separate hallway one of the “most significant physical symbols of . . . profound shifts in psychological attitudes among the elite.”⁵ Yet, despite the overall trend of separating rooms, corner rooms, side rooms, or antechambers designated for personal use remained in high demand. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such rooms had a variety of other names, including *study*, *office*, *library*, *dressing-room*, *gallery*, or *oratory*. But most common was *closet*, the period’s generic term for a private space. In a mid-eighteenth-century treatise, English architect Isaac Ware urged, “In the planning out of the several rooms, the architect must not forget, on any occasion, to make the best use of all natural recesses for closets, and he must contrive for them where the disposition of the plan does not readily throw them in his way.”⁶ As Pepys’s journal makes clear, the appeal of closets had already begun filtering down from the top of the social spectrum by the mid-seventeenth century. By the mid-eighteenth century, even designs for tiny country cottages included closets (figure 4).

Thus far, the most prevalent theme in the history of the closet has been collecting. At least since the sixteenth century, midwives, cooks, alchemists, and apothecaries had stocked closets with the obscure ingredients, documents, and equipment needed for their arts and trades. In the seventeenth century, other closets began to house a greater range of things, including beautifully bound books and manuscripts, preserved

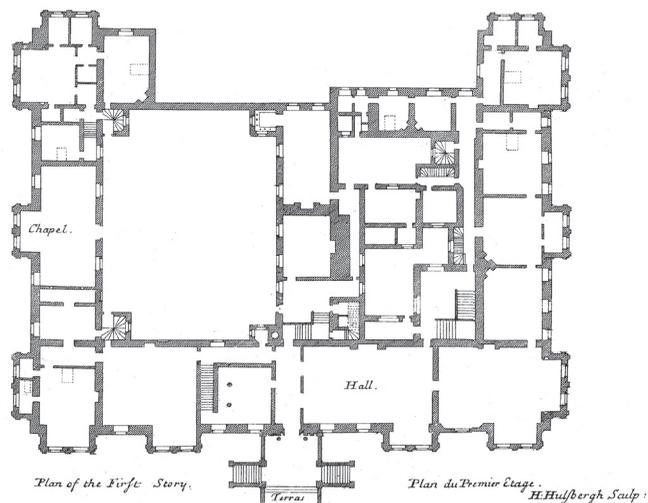


FIG. 2. In the late sixteenth century, many rooms in the enfilade wings of the ground floor of Longleat House, Wiltshire, could be accessed only via other rooms. (Architectural plan of Longleat House, 1570. Reprinted from Colen Campbell, *Vitruvius Britannicus* [London: Bell, Taylor, Clements, and Smith, 1715]. Courtesy of Marquand Library of Art and Archeology, Princeton University.)

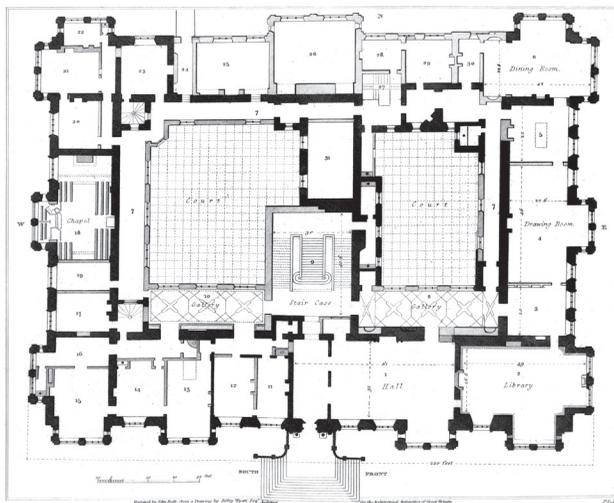


FIG. 3. By the early nineteenth century, the rooms on the ground floor of Longleat House were both better separated from and better connected to one another, thanks to the addition of corridors and doorways. (Architectural plan of Longleat House, 1809. Reprinted from John Britton, *The Architectural Antiquities of Great Britain* [London: Longmans, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1807]. Courtesy of Marquand Library of Art and Archeology, Princeton University.)

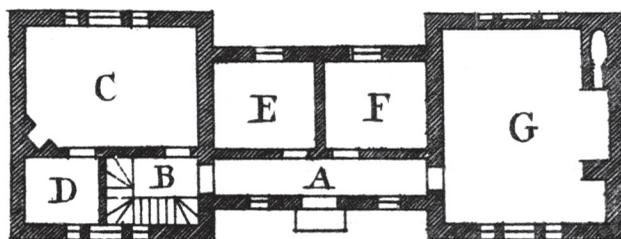


FIG. 4. The closet (D) on the ground floor of this small farmhouse links to the parlor (C). (Architectural plan of cottage with closet. Reprinted from William Halfpenny, *Useful Architecture* [London: Robert Sayer, 1760]. Courtesy of University of Wisconsin-Madison Library.)

animals and plant specimens, coins, medals, shells, gems, and all kinds of works of art—things deemed special, explicitly not for everyday use—as collecting was increasingly deemed a requisite feature of the fashionable lifestyle. The sons and, occasionally, the daughters of English merchants and traders were following in noble footsteps on their own Grand Tours of Europe, and from spectacular continental closets such as that of Ferrante Imperato, they cultivated desires for cosmopolitan collections of their own (figure 5).

John Tradescant and his son, both travellers and gardeners, created one of the most famous English curiosity collections of the century, known as the Ark (figure 6). In 1656 it contained:

1. Birds with their eggs, beaks, feathers, clawes, spurres.
2. Fourfooted beasts with some of their hides, hornes, and hoofs.
3. Divers sorts of strange Fishes.
4. Shell-creatures . . .
5. Severall sorts of Insects, terrestriall.
6. Mineralls, and those of neare nature with them. . . . Outlandish Fruits from both the Indies, with Seeds, Gemmes, Roots, Woods, and divers Ingredients Medicinall, and for the Art of Dying.
7. Mechanicks, choice pieces in Carvings, Turnings, Paintings.
8. Other Variety of Rarities.
9. Warlike Instruments, European, Indian, etc.
10. Garments, Habits, Vest s, Ornaments.
11. Utensils, and Housholdstuffe.
12. Numismata, Coynes antient and modern, both gold, silver and copper, Hebrew, Greeke, Roman both Imperiall and Consular[.]
13. Medalls, gold, silver, copper, and lead.⁷

FIG. 5. The son of a wealthy apothecary in Naples welcomes visitors to his father's renowned cabinet of curiosities. (Engraving from Ferrante Imperato, *Dell'Historia Naturale* [Naples 1599].)





To *John Tradescant* the younger, surviving.

Anagr:
JOHN TRADESCANT.
Cannot hide Arts.

HEire of thy Fathers goods, and his good parts,
Which both preserve, & augment 't his store,
Tracing th' ingenuous steps he trod before :
Proceed as thou begin'st, and win those hearts,
With gentle cur't'sie, which admir'd his Arts,
Whilst thou conceal'st thine own, & do'st deplore
Thy want, compar'd with his, thou shew'st them
Modesty clouds not worth, but hate diverts, 'more,
And flames base envy, **ARTS** he **CANNOT**
(**HIDE**
That has them. Light through every chink is
spy'd.

*Nugas has ego, pessimus Poëta,
Plantarum tamen, optimique amici
Nusquam pessimus aſtimator, egi.*

GUALTERUS STONEHOUSUS
Theologus seruum natus.

FIG. 6. The poem that opens the Ark's catalogue plays on an anagram of the collectors' name: John Tradescant CANNOT HIDE his ARTS. (Frontispiece reprinted from John Tradescant, *Musaeum Tradescantianum; or, A Collection of Rarities* [London: Grismond and Brooke, 1656]. Courtesy of the Smithsonian Libraries, Washington, DC.)

The Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge, England's earliest scientific institution, founded in 1660, aimed to generate formal universal rules for analyzing collections like the Ark. Tradescant's inventory reflects a commitment to thinking systematically about the range of objects in the collection. Suggesting the hierarchy of nature over art, natural specimens come first, grouped into separate animal and mineral categories, followed by human-made objects, grouped into discrete aesthetic and cultural categories, which include antiquities from around the world. However, whimsy is given its due in the inventory too, in catchall qualifiers like "Divers sorts" and "choice." The vague "Other Variety of Rarities" is even granted a line of its own. Charles II and Pepys were in good company as collectors of things like fetuses and gallstones. Sometimes just the impulse to look at something and think about it a little bit longer was enough to make it closet-worthy.

The first English use of closet for a private room dates to the late fourteenth century. Cabinet, which initially evolved as the diminutive of the

English word *cabin*, came into use as a close synonym of closet in the mid-sixteenth century.⁸ But its meaning was also colored by the French word *cabinet*, which could refer either to a private room or a chest of drawers. Mark Girouard explains: “As collections grew the owner’s personal closet or cabinet [room] was likely to prove inadequate to house them. . . . Little extra cabinets [mobile storage] appeared, devoted entirely to precious objects.”⁹ Throughout the long eighteenth century, cabinet continued to be used interchangeably with closet to refer to a private room, especially in political contexts. However, as these rooms filled with collectibles, the cabinet was increasingly distinguished as a moveable wooden storage unit, one that might be housed in the closet. By the middle of the seventeenth century, makers of freestanding wooden furniture had a distinct and busy enough trade to form a guild apart from the joiners: like joiners, cabinetmakers were carpenters, but they did finer, more detailed woodwork (figure 7).

By Krystof Pomian’s definition, a collection is “a set of natural or artificial objects, kept temporarily or permanently out of the economic circuit, afforded special protection in enclosed spaces adapted specifically for

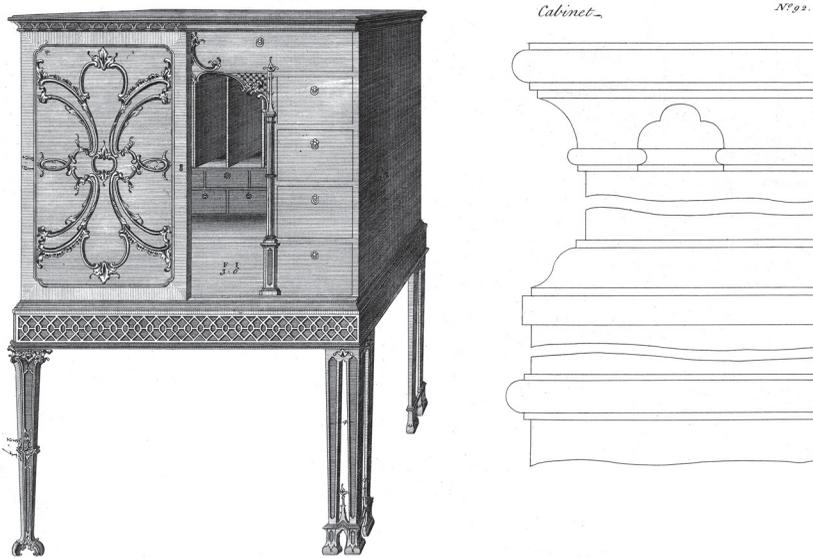


FIG. 7. By the mid-eighteenth century, intricate designs, like this one for an elegant freestanding cabinet, had made Thomas Chippendale a household name. (Engraving reprinted from Thomas Chippendale, *Gentleman and Cabinet Maker's Director* [London: Osborne, Piers, Sayer, and Swan, 1754]. Courtesy of The William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University Library.)

that purpose.”¹⁰ Studies of collecting suggest that the physical isolation of the closet brought a feeling of stillness and timelessness that served the pursuit not just of knowledge but of self-knowledge, and of personal, even existential autonomy. Susan Stewart envisions the closet as a place emptied of “any relevance other than that of the [collecting] subject,” where the collector satisfies a yearning to stop the relentless flow of history, of labor and industry.¹¹ “The ultimate term in the series that marks the collection is the ‘self,’” Stewart proposes, “the articulation of the collector’s own ‘identity.’”¹² Patrick Mauriès reiterates, “It is possible to define the ‘collector’ as . . . a man with a mania for completeness. By taking objects out of the flux of time he in a sense ‘mastered’ reality.”¹³ Barbara Benedict points out that even as universal systems of classification became more widely known in the eighteenth century, collectors’ awareness of their unique interests and perspectives also stood to gain to the extent that they consciously rejected or refined such shared systems: “Curious people—virtuosi, collectors, people with private cabinets—take valuable objects out of the sphere of public meaning and use them in their individual construction of a mirroring but independent field of power.”¹⁴ As John Brewer notes, illustrations of seventeenth-century cabinets and collections often included a figure of Venus, reinforcing the idea that collectors were *amateurs*, indulging their own fanciful pleasures.¹⁵

A humbler version of modern self-making comes to light in the scholarship on closet prayer. In a large English household in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the closet could refer to an oratory where the whole family and any guests could pray together, perhaps under the guidance of a private chaplain. Notably, the recessed closet from which Pepys watches the king take communion in Whitehall Chapel is big enough to accommodate him along with “a great many others.”¹⁶ However, far more often, the closets used for prayer were smaller, and closet prayer was solitary. In the early seventeenth century, the King James Bible lent new concreteness to a passage from chapter 6, verse 6 in the Book of Matthew: “But when thou prayest enter into thy Closet; and when thou hast shut thy Door, Pray to thy Father which is in secret, and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly.” Previously the passage had been loosely translated from the original ancient Greek as a call to look inward. Now a specific setting was named. Some Protestant theologians insisted that such solo prayer was more important than going to church because the practice entirely dispensed with the hierarchical mediations, not least the clergy, that in their view had corrupted Catholicism (figures 8, 9, and 10).

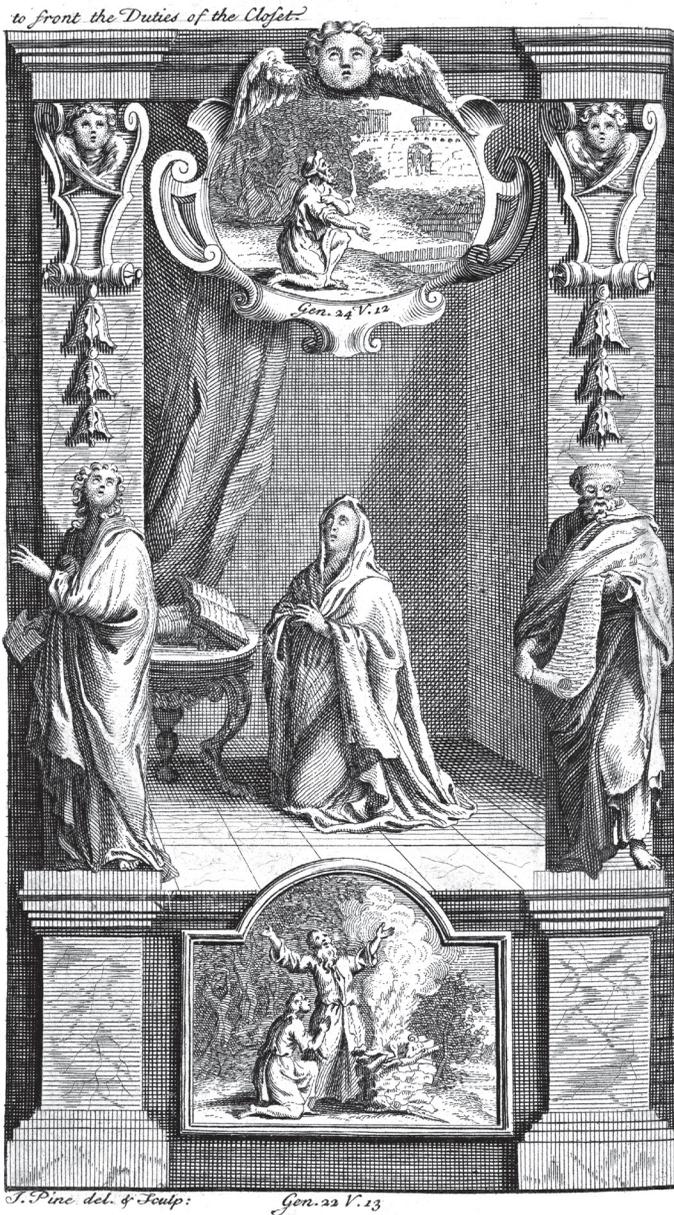


FIG. 8. Dozens of manuals, like *Duties of the Closet*, printed and reprinted throughout the period, elaborate the procedures and rewards of developing a personal relationship with God. (Frontispiece from William Dawes, *Duties of the Closet* (London: J. Wilford, 1735). Reproduced by permission of the British Library, London, UK © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved/Bridgeman Images.)

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THE

FIGS. 9 AND 10. The carefully choreographed program of self-reflection prescribed in *Duties of the Closet* is typical of private prayer manuals. (Table of contents from Dawes, *Duties of the Closet*. Reproduced by permission of the British Library, London, UK © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved/Bridgeman Images.)

Studies of closet prayer have especially considered how spiritual self-reflection shored up modern psychological interiority. Michael Edson calls closet prayer “a tool” for “diverting attention” inward, away from “the sensual and practical concerns that dominate everyday life.”¹⁷ Richard Rambuss calls it “the technology by which the soul becomes a subject,” finding in seventeenth-century men’s private confessions to God and Jesus the beginnings of the view that our most hidden desires and passions determine our personal identity.¹⁸ E. J. Clery notes that the rooms where Pamela and Clarissa write and meditate on escape in Samuel Richardson’s novels also serve as prayer closets: both heroines can surmount the values, if not the violence, of their persecutors by way of sustained solitary attention to their own Christian virtue. Clarissa is “rarely deprived of closet and key,” Clery observes, and Pamela’s “distinctive and autonomous female mind . . . is cultivated in the closet.”¹⁹ In

a reversal of this logic, Effie Botonaki also considers the patriarchal limits of the apparent autonomy of women's prayer closets, proposing that, for a married woman, this private room, like the diary she was instructed to keep there, was "at once a prison cell and a space of freedom," since the same Christian doctrine that invited her self-reflection also demanded that she share these thoughts with her husband.

Many women and men, not least Pepys, read and wrote religiously in their private rooms less in the spiritual sense than in the idiomatic sense. Diaries, commonplace books, and all kinds of other documents and papers shared drawer and shelf space with other objects in closets. However, as collections grew in scale and variety among the wealthiest English people, the number of closets devoted exclusively to the storage of books increased.²⁰ Private libraries were mostly a male prerogative, but Heidi Brayman Hackel has shown that already by the mid-sixteenth century at least a few elite English women also had them.²¹ As the closet came to be known as the best place to engage quietly with texts, plays written to be read rather than performed were first called *closet dramas* in the late eighteenth century. Scholarship on closet drama highlights how noble female authors came to define this genre and, by extension, the closet itself in opposition to the theater's unpredictable, embodied, and distinctly eroticized sociability.²² Yet, as Thomas Laqueur points out, women absorbed by books in private were negatively associated with sexual autonomy and caricatured as one-handed readers (figure 11).²³

In the second half of the seventeenth century, some his-and-hers closets were first designated as *dressing rooms*, underlining the common use of the space for putting on and taking off clothes (figure 12).²⁴ In theory the term was as gender-neutral as *closet*. However, because for at least two centuries



FIG. 11. Without recourse to books, the cat has already found the pleasure her mistress seeks. (Engraving from Charles Williams, *Luxury, or the Comforts of a Rumpford*, 1801. Reproduced by permission. © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.)

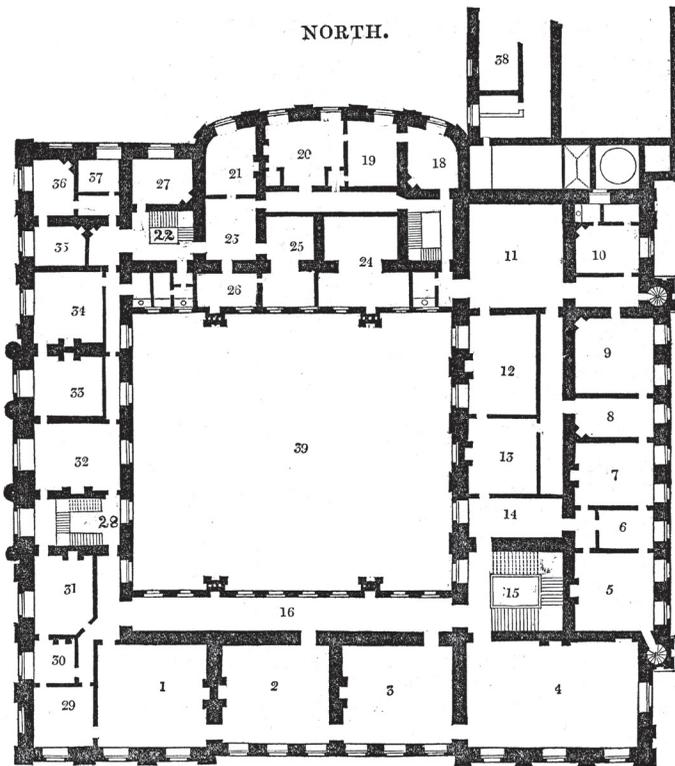


FIG. 12. The state dressing room is a corner room on the upper story at Chatworth House (29), which attaches to another dressing room (30), which in turn attaches to a large bedroom (31): his, hers, theirs. (Architectural plan of Chatsworth House, state room story. Reprinted from Stephen Glover, *The Peak Guide* [Derby: Mozley and Son, 1830]. Courtesy of Widener Library, Harvard University.)

the English closet had cultivated a reputation, alongside that of the Italian *studiolo*, as a site of “thinking, writing, and masculinity,” as Mary Poovey puts it, women’s closets were far more likely than men’s to be associated specifically with dressing and undressing.²⁵ Tita Chico has uncovered the layers of misogyny surrounding the gendered opposition of closets and dressing rooms: “Women’s privacy in the eighteenth-century dressing room . . . threatened to imitate the paternalistic order that the gentleman’s closet had embodied for over three centuries.”²⁶ By reductively associating the dressing room with increasingly polarized and essentialized views of femininity and female sexuality, male writers of the period were trying to minimize this threat, Chico argues. At first,

women's private dressing rooms called to mind the reputed sexual accessibility of Restoration actresses by way of association with the period's theatrical *green rooms* or *tiring rooms*, where playgoers, ostensibly passing through to their theater seats, might see female players getting ready for the performance. Later, as domestic ideologies were more sharply articulated, the dressing room came to emblemize the introspection and modesty of the ideal wife and mother.²⁷ Chico's readings of *Pamela*, *Clarrissa*, and *Sir Charles Grandison* demonstrate Richardson's pivotal role in redefining the dressing room as "an architectural analogue for the production of virtue, epistolarity, and interiority."²⁸

Chico and others have explored how the visual sense helped to cohere the gendered subjects forming in and around historical closets. On the one hand, as Barbara Benedict points out, as the emerging scientific discourse of the period legitimated curiosity as the affective engine of the intellectual drive, the desire to closely examine the world and everything and everyone in it was increasingly recast in positive terms. On the other hand, the limits of this voracious visual desire were signaled by those who fixed their gaze. *Peeping Toms*, who looked through the key holes of ladies' closets or hid in closets to peer into adjoining chambers, personified the selfish, excessive extreme of this way of looking.²⁹ Given how quickly examples like Pepys with his peep holes or Mr. B spying on Pamela spring to mind, it's not hard to see why, via the name Tom, this aggressive form of voyeurism was usually attributed to men and male characters.³⁰ Yet Benedict, McKeon, and Diane Berrett Brown show how experiences of private erotic spectatorship precipitate the psychological and intellectual development of young women and of female characters of the period too. Brown finds that in French erotic literature the closet setting serves "the auto-enlightenment of a young girl through voyeuristic experiments."³¹ Similarly, McKeon argues that, in John Cleland's pornographic novel, the experience of secret looking teaches Fanny Hill to distinguish between sexual and more refined aesthetic pleasures.³²

The closet and the visual sense also converge in one of the period's most flexible philosophical symbols of intellectual autonomy and of the cognitive processes by which we come to know anything at all. From the Latin for dark chamber, the camera obscura, sometimes known in England as a dark closet, is entirely enclosed except for a small opening or lens. As light passes through the aperture, a detailed image of whatever is outside is projected onto the inner wall. Jonathan Crary explains that in the early modern period this ancient technology was "a widely used means of observing the visible world, an instrument of popular entertainment,

of scientific inquiry, and of artistic practice” as well as “a model, in both rationalist and empiricist thought, of how observation leads to truthful inferences about the world.”³³ John Lyons explores how, for the rationalist René Descartes, the camera obscura provides an abstract metaphorical image of the inner light of reason separating clear and distinct ideas from less certain types of knowledge.³⁴ Later in the century, the new empirical epistemology that evolved in and around England’s Royal Society drew on both the dark closet and the collectors’ cabinet as inter-related material models or metonyms for how we acquire ideas via experience and then retain them. In John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the mind, like the camera obscura, begins as a blank space of visual possibility: “Methinks, the understanding is not much unlike a closet wholly shut from light, with only some little openings left, to let in external visible resemblances, or ideas of things without.”³⁵ Yet our ideas endure because the mind also has a storage capacity: “The senses at first let in particular ideas, and furnish the yet empty cabinet: and the mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory, and names got to them.”³⁶ Though Locke’s *Essay* has the best known mental closets in late seventeenth-century England, as Brad Pasanek and Sean Silver have demonstrated, such figures were quite common and varied widely.³⁷

Technological autonomy merges with architectural and bodily autonomy in the prehistory of the modern toilet, in which the separate historical trajectories of the dressing room, privy chamber, *garde de robe*, close stool, water closet, and bath intersect. As Girouard and Lawrence Wright point out, much of the necessary plumbing and engineering had been available for two centuries when flushable toilets first regularly appeared in select English homes at the end of the eighteenth century. Both the equipment and the private room in which it was housed reflected a new desire to have human waste disappear immediately—the substance, but also smell of it—without further human intervention. The many uneven efforts at distancing bodies from waste that constitute the history of the English bathroom are reflected in the language of toilet, which, Wright observes, is “an etymologists’ nightmare”:

chamber comes by way of *chamber pot* to mean the pot itself; the adjective *privy* (private) comes by way of *privy chamber* to mean the chamber or room itself. *Closet* (small room) comes by way of *water-closet* to mean the apparatus, not the room. *Lavatory* (washing place) comes to mean the water-closet, and to some dainty-minded manufacturers

even means the apparatus. *Apparatus* is used here only for want of one accurate word for it. Luckily for confused foreigners, W.C. is one of England's three great contributions to universal speech.³⁸

Significantly, the broad association in eighteenth-century Britain between the word *closet* and the increasing desire for personal privacy has a lasting legacy in the term *water closet*, which to this day is the euphemism of choice in many languages for both the flushing toilet and the room for a single occupant that holds it.

THE TRADITIONAL PUBLIC CLOSET

Drawing substantially on an older and more overtly political history of architecture, *The Closet* unsettles the dominant image of the solitary, autonomous, and specialized closet. It stresses that the closet's various functions and associations overlapped, that these overlapping functions often brought people together, both actually and virtually, and that, in closet encounters, status, power, and publicness—not just privacy—were always at issue. The proposition that eighteenth-century closets, both at court and beyond it, were always in some way public spaces rests most simply on the question of numbers and semantics. As Lawrence Klein points out, “What people in the eighteenth century most often meant by ‘public’ was sociable as opposed to solitary (which was ‘private’).”³⁹ More centrally, however, the proposition rests on the question of how sociability was inflected in the context of the eighteenth-century closet. In this regard, it's worth noting our modern intuitive association of intimate relationships, especially romantic or conjugal couples, with privacy. As Patricia Spacks observes, if we now readily understand privacy to potentially include another person in “a union of two against the world,” that's a reflection of how the modern value of privacy has been established in connection to the idea of loving freely.⁴⁰ Indeed, many twentieth-century philosophers have claimed that privacy must be prized precisely because it is a means to the end of intimacy: “Without the possibility of privacy, the argument goes, intimate relationships would prove impossible.”⁴¹ Or, as Spacks puts it elsewhere: “The difference between relationships chosen and those inflicted involves the playing out of a dynamic of privacy.”⁴² To approach the closet as a site of public intimacy is, therefore, to deliberately take a step back from—to register the historical contingency of—this modern investment in affective choice. When the king invited you to

his closet and to say no would be treason, had you really chosen that intimacy? While making visible many of the ways that affect, ambition, and obligation inevitably intermingled in eighteenth-century interpersonal relations, approaching the closet as a site of public intimacy also uncovers its important role as a conceptual bridge between the traditional publicness of the centralized and hierarchical court and the new form of mediated, inclusive publicness that, in Jürgen Habermas's influential argument, would become the lifeblood of modern liberal democracies.

Whereas under the feudal system, court duties and the privileges that went along with them had generally been passed down through generations of estate holders, the Tudor kings and queens discovered that continually assigning and reassigning key positions gave them many more opportunities to exercise their supposedly God-given prerogative. Floor plans at court were adjusted accordingly. Under Henry VII, the primary chamber where the monarch sat in state surrounded by his courtiers had been split into a presence chamber, accessible to all suitors, and a more remote privy chamber, for informal receptions and meals. The division represented "at once an architectural and an administrative innovation," as Curtis Perry puts it. Henry VIII later finessed the use of this frontier by dividing the privy chamber into separate withdrawing and bedchambers and furthermore by choosing "to staff [his private rooms] with men of sufficient status to capitalize on the unique access made possible by their intimate service."⁴³ Thus the king established a buffer zone between himself and the court, in the form of a special class of courtiers who had the privilege of serving his two bodies: not only the divinely ordained sovereign, but also the mortal man, who retreated to remote rooms for food and rest. Elizabeth I took even greater advantage of this new strategy of withdrawal from the most frequented, central spaces of the palace by sometimes dining quietly in the privy chamber while important guests banqueted in state in her presence chamber, with the "full ceremony" extended also "to an imaginary queen at an empty table."⁴⁴ These transformations of court interiors and their uses ensured that the majority of courtiers could make contact with the monarch only in formal settings, while the elite servants on the intimate side of the buffer zone, such as gentlemen or ladies of the bedchamber and the master or mistress of the robes, had many more and markedly different opportunities to communicate with the king or queen.

Influenced by French palace architecture, the Stuart monarchs further refined the Tudor strategy of withdrawal. The closet in particular became central to the English court after 1660, when the newly restored Charles II

began adapting the European etiquette he had admired during his exile. In previous English courts, the closets attached to bedchambers were used for private study or prayer, or as privies or sleeping quarters for close servants, and were considered, in Girouard's words, "useful but not essential."⁴⁵ After the Restoration, however, the king's withdrawing chamber and bedchamber were turned into sumptuous reception rooms, in which large groups of visitors might be received either at a *levée* in the morning or at a *couchée* in the evening, and thus the privacy of the closet was increasingly singled out, assuming the same secretive role as the *cabinet* in French *appartements*.⁴⁶ As Girouard explains, French courtly *cabinets*, "small rooms but very richly decorated," were "like little shrines at the end of a series of initiatory vestibules."⁴⁷ Likewise, access to the English royal closet came to indicate or bestow a greater degree of respect and prestige than had been possible anywhere in the Tudor or previous Stuart courts when the privy chamber, withdrawing chamber, and bedchamber were all intimate spaces in their own right.

Emulating Louis XIV, Charles appointed a senior page of the backstairs and keeper of his closet to ensure his control over those who could penetrate his inner sanctum. This eclectic group of visitors included family members and prominent courtiers as well as courtesans and lower-status petitioners—anyone that he didn't want to receive in the view of the whole court. The ritual that Pepys describes, of waiting for the Duke of York in the outermost room of his apartment at Whitehall then being led back to his closet—the innermost room—reflects the way elite architecture shaped the performance of intimacy and access. As Girouard puts it, "Since each room in the sequence of an apartment was more exclusive than the last, compliments to or from a visitor could be nicely gauged not only by how far he penetrated along the sequence, but also by how far the occupant of the apartment came along it—and even beyond it—to welcome him" (figure 13). Alternately, the keeper of the closet could mediate access to the royal master or mistress via the successive rooms in the apartment or via a private back staircase that led directly into the intimate room: "While the crowd was hopefully approaching the king by the official path—through the saloon and along the axis of honour—the person or persons to whom he really wanted to talk could bypass them entirely, and be quietly introduced at the inner end of the sequence by being brought up the backstairs."⁴⁸

People honored with extended private time with royalty or top courtiers were called favorites. Offices like groom of the stole, master of the robes, or secretary entailed regular and very close proximity to the master's or

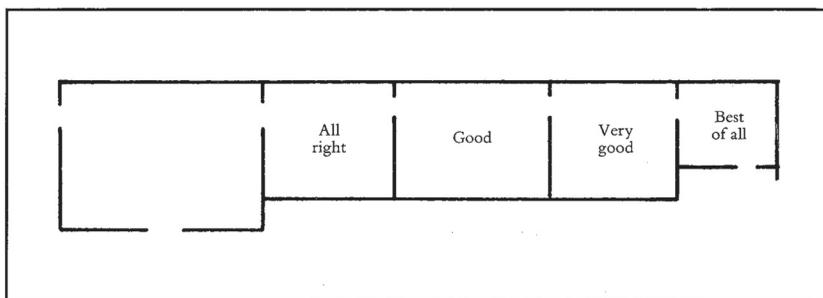


FIG. 13. The incremental status of rooms in a state apartment accounts for the special charge of the closet at the end. (Mark Girouard, "The Axis of Honour in the Formal House." Reproduced from *Life in the English Country House* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994], 144, by permission of Yale Representation Limited through PLS Clear.)

mistress's body, often in various sorts of closets. Especially where such offices were concerned, both men and women tended to select favorites of their own sex. Magnanimously suspending the codes of deference that typically distanced them from social inferiors, royal and noble patrons exchanged this basic hierarchical difference for a state of intense mutual dependency for as long as they wished. Whereas affairs between men and women could threaten lines of dynastic succession, the predominantly same-sex alliances of the closet acquired their charge in relation to other tenuous networks of power at court and shared secrets of state. More so than other relationships, favoritism acquired its meaning relative to the whole social complex of the court from which the patron and favorite were physically but never fully psychically withdrawn: others needed to know what they were missing. In Thomas King's words, "Courtiers, male and female, flaunted their subordination as the mark of their favor. They displayed, proudly, their proximity to sovereign spectacle as the sign of their preferment."⁴⁹ This form of relationship posed greater risks than simply remaining, undistinguished, among the crowd of courtiers, but the potential for rewards, including but by no means limited to the emotional ones, was also far greater. On the other hand, although power very clearly flowed from the top down prior to admission to the closet, the unusual intimacy of closet relationships made kings and queens feel vulnerable too. They needed loyal allies and had reason to fear when their special attentions were received with indifference, or worse. With respect to the hierarchical conditions of admission, the protocols of alliance were continuous with those of the rest of the court. However, with respect to the special informality and state of temporary equality with which the fa-

vorite was honored, they were utterly unique and circumscribed by their distinctive architecture.

Though husbands, wives, and other family members sometimes had occasion to meet in these rooms, closets were designed above all to bring together people not already bound by blood, marriage, or a formal courtship—not adhering to protocols of family or romance. Unlike family ties, preference could be taken away as quickly as it was given. The closet’s historical role in continually consolidating and asserting royal prerogative meant that the interpersonal relationships of the closet were unstable as a rule: their form was impermanence no matter how long they actually lasted. Moreover, as chapter 2 will especially show, throughout the long eighteenth century the fundamental precariousness of closet sociability was amplified by growing uncertainty about the nature and source of closet relations. 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 well-connected and less wealthy than Pepys in his prime—visited, coveted, and acquired private rooms. It was not always obvious how the former models of formalized informality and absolutist interdependence, for which closets had been designed, could or should apply.

Mark Girouard points out in passing that the spatial dynamics of the early modern formal apartment would be reversed if the quality of the visitor superseded that of the host: in this case, the “grander visitor was pressed to penetrate to the inner sanctuary, but could not always be tempted.”⁵⁰ In the diary, Pepys describes this sort of inverted absolutist dance with men like Sir William Warren, Sir William Coventry, and Sir Henry Capell, whose visits to his closet appear to honor him more than them. However, the diary also reveals that a growing uncertainty and disagreement regarding the traditional importance of good blood could make the social dance of the closet more intricate than the simple reversal that Girouard describes. Pepys was on close terms with the future king, and the value of closet encounters had to do in part with the other people to whom each party was allied. As Pepys’s wealth and administrative responsibilities grew, his mediocre birth came to seem to him less relevant as a measure of his social position, and his reputation and connections more so. Hyperaware and thus, at times, duly wary of the potent interplay of power and proximity in this space, Pepys might defer to hierarchical codes of closet decorum, but he also sometimes resisted or reinterpreted them. His efforts to stay out of Abigail Williams’s closet after his initial curiosity had been satisfied, without insulting his colleague Lord

Brouncker, show how complex the social calculations could become. If the key question for closet solitude was “Who am I?,” proximity to other people in closets led occupants to ask, “Who am I in relation to you?” Pepys understood—though surely not half so well as his maids—how uncomfortable the answers could be, and moreover that merely to entertain the question was to begin to create a bond, however unwelcome.

Though literary and cultural historians have predominantly focused on closets as sites of self-knowledge and self-development, the sociability of the space has attracted interest from scholars of collecting. Collectors knew that opening up the closet and explaining its contents to others were crucial stages in the collecting process.⁵¹ Evidence from Pepys certainly suggests that the roles of closet guest and closet guide could be equally pleasing, whether the tour happened spontaneously or was orchestrated in advance. Recognizing the residual public intimacy of the closet serves to amplify the attention to social capital already present in the scholarship on closet display and the prehistory of the museum. Kate Loveman argues that the closet where Pepys stored his growing collection of books—and later his private library—served not only as “reflections of the self, sites of learning, repositories of wealth,” but also as “claims to status” and “manifestations of social ties.”⁵² Similarly, in her account of female art collectors, Sheila Ffolliott explains that royal and noblewomen filled their closets with portraits “not just of their immediate families, but their enlarged kin network” in order to exhibit the superiority of their lineage as well as their wide circle of influence.⁵³ Daniela Bleichmar considers how collectors determined the meanings of collected items anew in the context of impromptu descriptions to guests: “The collection functioned not only as an accumulation of objects but also as a narrated social experience.”⁵⁴ John Brewer discusses how British collectors also gathered select acquaintances into another kind of collection, a club of *amateurs* and *aficianados*, that could ensure that cherished antiquities and curios would elicit just the right kind of appreciation from just the right sort of people.⁵⁵ Throughout this book, remembering courtly origins helps to contextualize and flesh out the closet’s intricate social dynamics while considering how such dynamics were both reiterated and refashioned by way of their many textual representations. Chapter 4 in particular examines dozens of the closet collections that were displayed virtually, in print. Thus, for example, when the British Museum briefly appears in this chapter—in a printed catalog—its origins in an elite cabinet of curiosities help to explain the vast discrepancy between the museum’s purportedly inclusive yet practically exclusive models of access and education that the catalog explicitly aims to bridge.⁵⁶

THE CLOSET AND THE SHIFTING SOCIAL IMAGINARY

If the closets proliferating in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary and material culture were interiority and autonomy machines, turning owners into themselves, they were also, at least as crucially, intimacy machines, turning occupants toward one another. The chapters to follow tackle closet connections between royals and favorites (chapter 2), patrons and artists (chapter 3), owners and intruders (chapter 4), and strangers (chapter 5), showing how the uncertain potential for temporarily suspending differences of social rank—as compounded or complicated by differences of wealth, culture, sex, religion, and nation—often made closet connections feel uneasy. The chapters will also demonstrate the closet’s value as a conceptual tool for navigating social change and media shift in eighteenth-century Britain. Though highly influential, social theorists Charles Taylor and especially Jürgen Habermas have been criticized, among other things, for understating the extent to which a new ideal of equality emerging in the eighteenth century covered over the inequity and violence that persisted, and persist to this day, under its guise. As figures of politicized intimacy in process, eighteenth-century closets provide a fresh vantage for this sort of critique, uncovering, alongside pleasure and enthusiasm, the confusion and uncertainty cast over the potential of relating as equals, whether face-to-face or virtually in print, even as its value was first positively articulated.

The social imaginary is Charles Taylor’s term for the mental plans by which people find their place in relation to others in a given society. Taylor points out that such mental plans may be conscious but generally remain largely unconscious. That is, a given social imaginary may be shaped and reflected in explicit theories, like Taylor’s own, that offer comprehensive explanations of how and why members of particular social groups interact with one another as they do or how and why these patterns should or could be altered. But for the most part, members of a given sector of society learn about their social reality simply by existing within it, imitating others and following or subtly deviating from shared practices and codes of etiquette. Our “‘repertory’ of collective actions” includes all the things we know how to do together, “all the way from the general election, involving the whole society, to knowing how to strike up a polite but uninvolved conversation with a casual group in the reception hall,” Taylor proposes, emphasizing the social understanding this process entails: “The discriminations we have to make to carry these off, knowing whom to speak to and when and how, carry an implicit map

of social space, of what kinds of people we can associate with in what ways and in what circumstances.”⁵⁷ As they multiplied in English households, closet protocols were gradually absorbed into the common repertory and assimilated into a shared practical map of social space. At the same time, increasing numbers of written representations of closet conversations served as scripts that readers might consciously or unconsciously draw on if they entered or imagined entering such spaces. By occasioning and distributing a deeper awareness of social patterns, the multiple representations of closets also cohered into an explicit map, an imaginative form of social theory.

The closet’s efficacy as an orienting structure for the eighteenth-century British social imaginary is in fact suggested in the spatializing language that Taylor and others commonly use to describe the social changes taking place in the period. In Taylor’s formulation, from fixed vertical networks, in which those at the top, by virtue of their royal or aristocratic blood, naturally protected and disciplined those below, a horizontally oriented social imaginary gradually emerged, in which an abstract equality between autonomous individuals was ascribed, and birth—innate status—lost its orienting force in social interaction. To a large extent, Britain’s new horizontal social imaginary was a way of reckoning social connection on a much grander scale than ever before: most ambitiously, by picturing all of humanity as one inclusive group in which traditional hierarchical differences could simply fade away. On the theoretical side of things, the social change was announced in radically anti-absolutist political philosophies, like Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, which famously declares all men to be “by Nature, all free, equal, and independent.”⁵⁸ With respect to social practices, this change has previously been linked to new places where British people from all levels of society began to enjoy mingling with one another across differences. Pleasure gardens, like Vauxhall and Ranelagh in London; circulating libraries, which supported new groups of readers all over England; masquerade balls, where music, gambling, and disguise temporarily overturned everyday social strictures; and especially coffee houses, busy hubs of business, news, and conversation, have all been represented as quintessential scenes of modern equalizing sociability.⁵⁹ Since the closet’s horizontal social orientation initially developed as a strategy for buttressing the vertical orientation of the court and the absolutist state as a whole, to allow that the closet too was one of the “spaces of modernity,” to borrow Miles Ogborn’s phrase, puts a provocative spin on that category, underscoring the sometimes muddled, often surprising course of social progress.

Taylor argues that the development of the modern social imaginary came hand-in-hand with three intersecting “forms of self-understanding” that penetrated and altered eighteenth-century British society: the economy, the public sphere, and popular sovereignty, correlated respectively to the rise of capitalism, of the print market, and of democratic political models. Though the closet arguably participated in all three areas of change, its association with reading and writing as well as sharing and storing knowledge made it peculiarly resonant in relation to the uneven emergence of print culture. William Caxton had brought the printing press to England in the late fifteenth century, but the handwritten manuscript had remained the dominant medium of textual transmission for the next two hundred years. In 1695, Parliament allowed the Printing and Licensing Act to lapse, and the Stationers’ Company, the royally appointed printers’ and publishers’ guild, lost its official jurisdiction over not only which books were made and sold, but also where, how, and by whom. Then, in 1710, the Statute of Anne specified that a publisher’s right to print a new text would not last in perpetuity, as previously, but only for a limited term, and that, for the first time, authors could hold the copyright to their own works. The eighteenth century therefore saw both quantitative changes in textual production, including the conspicuous increase in the numbers of printers and authors, books and broadsides, and in the range of opportunities for people to gain access to them, and qualitative changes, like the commercialization of the publishing industry and the professionalization of authorship, that followed from the new legal conditions of publication. The importance of the newer medium was not always evident or uncontested, however. As book historian Harold Love puts it, “Cultures of communication progress by supplementation as much as by replacement. . . . While we tend to think of early modern scribal culture as a survival of pre-print practices, we should remember that it was a triumphant survival, in that many times more handwritten texts were circulating in Britain in 1700 than was the case in 1600 or 1500.”⁶⁰ The scribal tradition had reflected and reinforced the elitist assumption that authorship and erudition were, and naturally should be, the prerogative of gentlemen and clergymen who had the requisite leisure for classical learning and for accruing comprehensive knowledge. Commercial booksellers and commercial authors still had to defend and promote their less reputable, profit-driven trade. Only very gradually did they articulate a coherent position of their own.

Jürgen Habermas was the first to extensively theorize how the rise of print culture helped to transform the eighteenth-century social imaginary.

However, not much of the cultural hesitation that Love emphasizes is reflected in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas has played a major role in drawing scholarly attention to the rise of bourgeois domestic privacy. Of particular significance to *The Closet*, Habermas argues that it was new horizontal relationships at home that laid the foundation for new horizontal connections via print throughout this period.⁶¹ He notes in particular that the replacement of the great hall, which had served for centuries as the ceremonial center of royal and noble households, by smaller, single-story rooms occurred alongside an emotional turn inward in family life, as represented especially by the rise of companionate marriage and the nuclear family. Though Habermas highlights interpersonal relationships between bourgeois spouses, and family-centric spaces like living rooms and dining rooms, his description of the value of the psychological freedom afforded by the new domestic privacy is much like that found throughout the body of scholarship on closet solitude: domestic privacy leads to a widespread “emancipation . . . of an inner realm, following its own laws, from extrinsic purposes of any sort.”⁶² He proposes that new kinds of broadly social—or, in his terms, modern public—feelings were bred from these deepening family connections by way of new feeling-ful literary genres, like the domestic novel, which generated endlessly self-fulfilling feedback loops, but which also, due to their popular appeal, connected readers emotionally and imaginatively with other family-loving readers.⁶³

The sphere of the public arose in the broader strata of the bourgeoisie as an expansion and at the same time completion of the intimate sphere of the conjugal family. . . . On the one hand, the empathetic reader repeated within himself the private relationships displayed before him in literature; from his experience of real familiarity, he gave life to the fictional one, and in the latter he prepared himself for the former. On the other hand, from the outset the familiarity whose vehicle was the written word, the subjectivity that had become fit to print, had in fact become the literature appealing to a wide public of readers. . . . They formed the public sphere of a rational-critical debate in the world of letters within which the subjectivity originating in the interiority of the conjugal family, by communicating with itself, attained clarity about itself.⁶⁴

Thus, as Habermas explains it, people who, on the basis of birth alone may previously have been at the margins of political and intellectual life,

were empowered by their shared appreciation of family intimacies to represent and value themselves, and one another, in a new way. By making use in turn of the increasing accessibility of print, the very medium that had represented them, they came to assert, both as writers and as readers, a new kind of mediated collective agency that competed with, and ultimately surpassed, that of the court.

As an exploration of the shift from a vertical to a horizontal social imaginary and more particularly of the interrelations of lived experiences of intimacy, literary representations of intimacy, and the imagined attachments between readers and writers of print, this book both leans on and pulls away from these well-known accounts of social change. As Clifford Siskin and William Warner point out, Habermas's "liberal-Marxist agenda" and that of many subsequent public sphere studies have emphasized human agency at the expense of the "wide range of objects, forms, technologies, and interactions" that also contributed to eighteenth-century media shift: "By separating the human from the tool and the group from its informing structures, public sphere studies makes the business of mediating meaning something that rests with strictly human agency."⁶⁵ In Jonathan Sterne's words, "To study technologies in any meaningful sense . . . requires attention to the fields of combined cultural, social, and physical activity—what other authors have called networks or assemblages—from which technologies emerge and of which they are part." Attending to the specificities of various closets as architectural, material cultural, social, and textual spaces, and to the particular protocols of exchange that came along with them, helps to situate the new sensibility of print within a complex network of interpersonal and nonhuman elements.⁶⁶ It especially complicates the democratic impetus of public feelings that is often assumed in liberal social theory. Though Habermas apparently offers *public sphere* as a neutral or descriptive term for a new kind of horizontal collective agency made possible by print, it also serves a prescriptive function for him, standing as "a model for rational negotiation through communication that we . . . have fallen away from (through the . . . 'decay' of the public sphere) but to which we should return," as Warner and Siskin put it.⁶⁷ For his part, Taylor notes that the universal human equality that was (and still is) central to the horizontal orientation has always been an ideal, demanding "a high degree of virtue" in the people with the most to lose.⁶⁸ However, considering that even for Locke there was little inconsistency between the natural state of human equality and either the British colonial policies justifying the displacement, enslavement, and massacre of millions of African and

Indigenous peoples or the laws of coverture that deemed wives male property, the new horizontal social imaginary in eighteenth-century Britain now seems not naive so much as tragically insincere. By revealing that of one of the most powerful blueprints for social change and media shift came from the deepest recesses of the absolutist court, the intimate closet unsettles the too-neat oppositions between antiquated (aristocratic/elitist) and modern (progressive/democratic) values, and between modern liberal (truly democratic) and degraded (hypercapitalist, empty) values on which the nostalgia of these narratives rests. Underscoring the intricate continuities between the traditional hierarchical publicness embodied by the monarch, court, and nobility, and the modern egalitarian publicness encapsulated by the virtual collective experience of print, the closet proffers an oddly pragmatic and performative prototype of social leveling.

Standing almost as a parody of Habermas's idealized domestic sphere, the eighteenth-century intimate closet also disrupts the sexism and heteronormativity of classic liberal theories of social change, in which confident bourgeois husbands are often explicitly or otherwise tacitly the protagonists. In Habermas's account, men's deep emotional connections to their wives shore up their desire and ability to actively engage in both commerce and critical discussions of state affairs beyond the home. Habermas suggests that stronger bonds with their husbands gave eighteenth-century literate women at least as much authority as men as readers of the popular literary genres that represented these feelings and as consumers in the new world of manufactured goods. But he also acknowledges the very real constraints for women when it came to taking up public space. Wives had long been and were still legally bound to a state of dependence. Loving or not, husbands were masters. Moreover, the new sexual division of labor was compounding the effects of traditional patriarchal ownership to further limit wives' participation in business and public discussion. Habermas notes that the many obstacles to actualizing emotional reciprocity between spouses were common themes of eighteenth-century writing and conversation.⁶⁹ Nevertheless, there is no necessary inconsistency for him between the radical promise of modern print publics as sites of universal communion and the ongoing political and economic supremacy of men over women, and of wealthy over poor men, in eighteenth-century Britain. The disembodied neutrality of published discourse, he supposes, created a terrain on which people could bracket their differences and meet and exchange ideas as equals.

The eighteenth-century closet lights up anew the contradictions in liberal discourse that have been exposed by feminist and queer critique.⁷⁰ The emotional structure of eighteenth-century closet bonds resembles that of Habermas's formative conjugal "community of love" insofar as, like in the newly private drawing or dining room, the hierarchical differences acknowledged elsewhere could dissolve into mutual feelings of concern. Yet the model of emotional parity established in the closet—a calculated strategy for repeatedly consolidating or acquiring power, largely, though not exclusively, under the control of the closet owner—is decidedly more instrumental and provisional than the model that Habermas attributes to psychologically autonomous spouses at home. Indeed, ironically, the reciprocity of the closet, even of the courtly closet, more closely resembles the sort of temporary bracketing of difference that Habermas attributes to participants in the modern public sphere.

Notwithstanding the essential precariousness of closet intimacies and women's disproportionate vulnerability to abuses of power, women often stand to gain when closet relationships take the place of conjugal coupledom as the imagined wellspring of modern public feelings. At court and in traditional ideology, birth trumped gender (and wealth): a queen ranked above a duke, and her closet would be bigger than his, or in any case more charged, because of it. This lingering aura of queenly entitlement may help to explain why women across the social spectrum desired and acquired closets or cabinets of their own throughout the eighteenth century. As closet guests, women benefited materially and emotionally from temporary reciprocity with other women (and sometimes men); as closet owners, women were in control of these benefits, exercising a widely recognized mode of social and political authority. By the same token, the precariousness of closet relations throws the men a bit off balance, undermining some of the lord-of-the-manor self-assuredness that Locke and Habermas implicitly celebrate. As the eighteenth-century fetish for voyeurism especially evinces, men's desires for closet intimacy could become excessive and disorienting. The heteronormativity of classic liberal social theory is especially destabilized. Centering modest companionate marriages as the basis for abstract emotional connections, Habermas privileges domestic novels in his account of the rise of the modern public feelings. The closet calls attention to literary texts, especially secret histories, in which all kinds of embodied extrafamilial relationships are prominent. Moreover, since the courtly closet had been designed for elite men and women to forge intense, potentially erotic bonds primarily with people of their own sex, it generates a more libidinal and

sexually fluid model of imagined sociability. Closet encounters are also much more suggestive than conjugal companionship of the overt and sometimes volatile negotiations of social status that characterized relations between strangers in the period and also, by extension, between authors and their anonymous readers.

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