

Review of The Closet: The Eighteenth-Century architecture of intimacy, by Danielle Bobker [Book review]

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Danielle Bobker, *The Closet: The Eighteenth-Century Architecture of Intimacy*, Princeton University Press, 2020. 288 pp. ISBN: 9780691198231.

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In 1664, Samuel Pepys' head is full of closets. It is just four years since he was part of the expedition to return Charles II from exile and he has been rewarded with high office in the Navy. But all Pepys can think of is building a closet in his house. He muses, "it is strange to think how building doth fill my mind and put all other things out of my thoughts." To read Daniel Bobker's rich and stimulating monograph, *The Closet* (2020) is to understand why his preoccupation is not so strange after all; it is to understand just how significant a role was played by the closet in shaping the culture of the long eighteenth century.

Bobker's monograph looks at role of the closet in constructing the "social imaginary" of the long eighteenth century. She uses the term "social imaginary" in the sense coined by the sociologist Charles Taylor to describe "the mental plans, by which people find their place in relation to others in a given society." To date, Bobker argues, critical work on the closet has focused on its role in the facilitation of modern selfhood and domestic privacy, but Bobker complicates and enriches this narrative by reinstating the vital role of closets in the politics of the early-modern court. To appreciate the origins of the closet not just as a place of retreat, prayer, and solitude, but as the locus of elite power play, is to shed new light on the multiple closet scenes which characterize eighteenth-century literature. Closets are read no longer as merely solitary spaces, but as spaces fraught with the politics and etiquette of status. The space of the closet, Bobker argues, is as important to Enlightened sociability and its new literary forms, indeed to the social imaginary of modernity in general, as is Habermas' coffee-house, or the pleasure gardens.

So, what does Bobker mean by a closet? The meaning, as she tells us, changes over history and it is the complexity of its history which is so key to her argument. Its first appearance in fourteenth-century England is as the general term for a secluded room or inner chamber used for a variety of purposes. But under the Tudors and Stuarts, with the advent of a culture of governance through favoritism, this "marginal room," known synonymously as the cabinet and the closet, was elevated to the center of court power. It was the room at the end of an enfilade of increasingly exclusive rooms into which the monarch invited only his most trusted advisors and favorites and lovers. After the Restoration this "King's cabinet" was increasingly emulated by the elite for whom, like the tulip bulbs of the mid-century, it was a most desirable symbol of status. But the seventeenth century also saw the development of these elite closets as a locus for the collection and display of art and curiosities, and around this there developed what Bobker calls an entire etiquette of "closet intimacy" in which the social standing both of owner and visitor were elaborately acted out. It is the "social imaginary" of this "closet intimacy" which, Bobker argues, facilitates, frames, and often constrains some of key cultural developments of the eighteenth century: the emergence of a marketplace of print culture, the museum, the sentimental novel.

By the mid- eighteenth century, Bobker tells us, this once prestigious little room had penetrated far beyond elite culture to become an integral part of genteel domestic architecture for use both by men and women. And the ubiquity of this "marginal" room in domestic architecture is mirrored by its representation in the new genres of print culture. Richardson's seminal novel *Pamela*, for example, turns on her use of the closet as a place of retreat, prayer,

and writing but also of class power play. Closets were so culturally resonant that they were, Bobker says, “the settings that writers wrote about before they wrote about settings as such.” These marginal spaces “were channels for some of the period’s greatest ideological tensions and most complicated feelings.”

Bobker’s monograph describes how the “social imaginary” of closet culture generates and impacts the new forms of print culture. Most conspicuously here the genres of the secret history and the closet anthologies. Both the secret histories (stories of the intrigues and misdemeanors of the elite) and the closet anthologies (printed collections of medical, scientific, and culinary arcana) traded on the idea of access to the elite “closet” to authorize their wares in the literary marketplace.

But if some of these new forms of print culture found their authorization in the closet, others found theirs by deliberately coming out of it and shutting the door behind them. When Mr Spectator famously declares at the start of the eighteenth century: “I shall be ambitious to have it said of me, that I have brought philosophy out of closets,” he seems to speak for the new democratizing spirit of print culture in general. For Mr Spectator it is in the coffee-house, where men from all classes purportedly intermingled promiscuously, and not the closet where meetings are intimate, select, and hierarchical, that provides the “social imaginary” for the new century. This, of course, will become the foundation of Habermas’ notion of the ‘public sphere’—part of what Bobker describes as Habermas’ liberal Marxist agenda.

Bobker follows more recent cultural critics such as William Warner and Clifford Siskin in challenging this agenda. To understand the complexity and the persistence of “closet” history, Bobker argues, is to understand the source and limitations of so many “universal” Enlightenment institutions. Bobker cites the British museum’s origins in the contents of an elite closet, for example, as a way of shedding light on the discrepancy between its “purportedly inclusive but practically exclusive models of access and education.” Bobker argues that as late as the second half of the eighteenth century the new “spaces of modernity” were still being framed and constrained by closet “intimacy.” In a wonderfully resonant phrase Bobker describes the sentimental ideas of the mid-century as “[t]he most explicit, expansive and influential justification for a horizontal social imaginary to date.” But even in this late mid-eighteenth-century genre, “intimate” sentimental encounters are framed by the closet. One whole chapter of Lawrence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey* takes place in a coach—in many ways an archetypal “space of modernity” where money and not rank dictates entry and the classes and even sexes intermingle. But as Bobker points out coaches are essentially ‘closets’ on wheels, the etiquette of closet intimacy, of social rank, is never entirely absent from such encounters. The ostensibly horizontal intimacy that Sterne locates in a carriage, Bobker argues, owes a debt to the “courtly closet as the original breeding ground of extra familiar intimacy.”

To acknowledge the “closet” as one of the spaces of modernity, however residual, is to understand some of the contradictions of the Enlightenment in its simultaneous commitment to universal rights and its blindness to slavery and to the rights of women. For in the words of Bobker, it is a “blueprint” for social change which emerges from “the deepest recesses of the absolutist court.”

But one of the pleasures afforded by Bobker's monograph is its refusal of absolutes. She is committed to unsettling, but not overturning, the "too-neat oppositions between antiquated (aristocratic/ elitist), and modern (progressive/ democratic), and between modern (truly democratic) and degraded (hyper capitalist, empty) values." Bobker is plenty capable of acknowledging simultaneously the empowering potential of these "desirable" rooms for women in the eighteenth century as places which conferred upon their owners "a widely recognized mode of social and political authority," alongside the darker legacy of "closet intimacies" which left women "disproportionately vulnerable to abuse of power." If anything, for elite women, at least, Bobker acknowledges, the legacy of the early-modern closet offered some ground for resistance to the redefinition of the space as a domestic dressing room—a space for the fashioning of ideal wives and mothers.

Bobker's monograph charts how the refashioning of the "closet" as an undesirably elite space which began in the eighteenth century marked a gradual descent in the prestige of this marginal room which has continued to the present day. Quoting the architectural historian, Mark Girourd, Bobker describes its "final ignominy as a large cupboard or room for the housemaid's sinks and mops." The status of the closet has undergone a *volte-face*, it is no longer a desirable space to occupy – indeed if enfilade architecture still existed, it would be the room at the end of a corridor of increasingly degraded spaces from which one is urged "to come out." And although Bobker is keen to resist conflating "the specific historical stakes and dynamics of historical modes of attachment" with those of our own time," she does add a coda to her monograph which toys with the idea of early modern "closet intimacy" as a way of problematizing the contemporary assumption that "coming out" for queer or trans people, is necessarily a positive experience. In line with the suspicion of enlightenment universal values which runs through the monograph Bobker questions whether the abandonment of "closet intimacies" for increasingly corporatized fantasy of a public where everyone is included is necessarily a positive experience.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading Bobker's *The Closet*, but if I have any reservation it is that, for a book which draws so productively on recent scholarship in material culture, it doesn't reward the reader with much sense of the materiality of individual closets themselves: their size, their contents, and the origin of the materials used in their construction. To be fair, this is not Bobker's emphasis, and even if it were, the scarcity of material detail is one of the frustrations of working with texts from long eighteenth century. Closets may, as Bobker argues, appear in eighteenth-century texts before it was conventional to write about settings in literature, but where they do appear, they conform to Johnson's dictum that a poet should not "number the streaks of a tulip." Bobker's monograph, however, does offer at least some material satisfaction by providing a prelude to each chapter from the diary of Samuel Pepys, the "period's most vociferous and known recorder of closet conversations." Here we learn among other things that Pepys' closet contained a large kidney stone which had been extracted from his own body and that his interest in the goings-on of the maid lead him to drill a peep hole in the wall.

The Closet (2020) is a smart, enjoyable, and ground-breaking scholarly book—an excellent example of the insight that the acknowledgement of objects as historical agents has brought to the discussion of literature.