closet, n.

Pronunciation: /'klɔzɪt/

Forms: Also ME–16 closet, ME–15 -ette, 15 claus(s)et, Sc. closat, 15–16 closset, 16 clossett.

Etymology: < Old French closet, diminutive of clos < Latin clausum: see close n. and -ET suffix. In later French applied exclusively to a small enclosure in the open air.

1.

a. A room for privacy or retirement; a private room; an inner chamber; formerly often = BOWER n. 2a, 2b; in later use always a small room: see 4.

1370 Robt. Cicyle 57 A slepe hym toke In hys closet.

1374 Chaucer Troilus & Criseyde ii. 1215 In a closet for to avyse her bettre, She went alone.

1490 Caxton tr. _Enydes_ xxii. 80 In her closet she hideth herself sore sighyng.

1530 J. Palsgrave _Lesclarcissement_ 206/1 Closet for a lady to make her redy in, chamberette.

1592 A. Day _Eng. Secretorie_ ii. sig. Q1, Wee do call the most secret place in the house appropriate vnto our owne priuate studies..a Closet.

1611 Bible (A.V.) Joel ii. 16 Let the bridegroome goe forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet.

1679–88 Secr. Serv. Money Chas. & Jas. (1851) 133 The Queen's garden closet at Windsor.

1713 Swift _Frenzy_ J. Dennis, While I was in my closet pondering the case of one of my patients.


b. esp. Such a room as the place of private devotion (with allusion to 1611 version of Matt. vi. 6). arch.

1611 Bible (A.V.) Matt. vi. 6 When thou prayest, enter into thy closet [Wyclif couch, 16th c. versions chamber, 1881 Rev. inner chamber].

1680 W. Beveridge Serm. (1729) I. 535 Retire into your closet..and there look back upon your lives.

1888 Abp. Benson in Times 15 Aug. 8/4 Many of our devout poor can find neither space nor quiet for..solitary closet prayer..For them the retirement of the spacious lonely church is the 'closet' of Christ.

c. As the place of private study or secluded speculation; esp. in reference to mere theories as opposed to practical measures.
1600  R. Hooker Of Lawes Eccl. Politie vii. xxiv, in Wks. (1662) 70  Abroad and at home, at their Tables or in their Closets.

1747  Ld. Chesterfield Let. 2 Oct. (1932) (modernized text) III. 1024  The scholar, who in the dust of his closet talks or writes of the world, knows no more of it, than that orator did of war, who..endeavoured to instruct Hannibal in it.

1789  G. Morris in J. Sparks Life G. Morris (1832) I. 311  In their closets they make men exactly suited to their systems; but..such men as exist nowhere else.

1880  W. A. Wright Shaks. Rich. III Pref. 60  Richard the Third, although not a play for the closet, has always been a favourite upon the stage.

1889  Spectator 23 Mar.,  The project..which..most attracts the philanthropists of the closet.

2.

a. The private apartment of a monarch or potentate; the private council-chamber; a room in a palace used by the sovereign for private or household devotions. Obs. exc. Hist. Clerk of the Closet: see CLERK n. Compounds 2.

b. A pew in the chapel of a castle occupied by the lord and his family, or in a Chapel Royal by the Royal family. Obs.

c1400 (≠c1390) Sir Gawain & Green Knight (1940) I. 934  Chaplayne\(\) to þe chapeles chosen þe gate..Pe lorde loutes þerto, & þe lady als, In-to a comly closet coynly ho entre\(\).

1530  J. Palsgrave Lesclarcissement 206/1  Closet, chapelle.

1549  H. Latimer 1st Serm. before Kynges Maiestie (new ed.) sig. D1\(\)

1565  Act 8 Eliz. c. 4. §1  Common Prayer in Churches, Chapels, Closets and Oratories.


1625  J. Mede in H. Ellis Orig. Lett. Eng. Hist. (1824) III. 202  If the Queens Closet where they now say masse were not large enough, let them have it in the Great Chamber.

1769  ‘Junius’ Stat Nominis Umbra (1772) I. xii. 81  You have now a strength sufficient to command the closet.

1849  T. B. Macaulay Hist. Eng. I. 547  James called into his closet Arnold Van Citters..and Everard Van Dykvelt.

1868  E. A. Freeman Hist. Norman Conquest (1876) II. App. 618  Dealings in the royal closet would be..likely to be known to a courtier and royal chaplain.

3.

a. A private repository of valuables or (esp. in later use) curiosities; a cabinet. arch. or Obs. In china-closet (q.v.) this passes into 3b.
SHAKESPEARE King Lear x. 11, I haue lockt the letter in my closet.

SHAKESPEARE Julius Caesar (1623) III. ii. 130 But heere's a Parchment..I found it in his Closet, 'tis his Will.

SHAKESPEARE Merry Wives of Windsor (1623) I. iv. 42 Pray you goe and vetch me in my Closet..a Box.

ASHMOLE Diary (1774) 326 Mr. Tradescant and his wife told me they had been long considering upon whom to bestow their closet of curiosities when they died.

MARQUIS OF HALIFAX Seasonable Addr. Houses of Parl. conc. Succession 10 The late House of Commons have..seiz'd Closets and Writings without Information.

J. CHAMBERLAYNE Magnæ Britannæ Notitia (ed. 22) II. i. iii. 375 Silver coins..still preserved in the closets of the curious.

tr. J. G. Keyssler Trav. III. 153 A closet full of pieces of rock crystal.

b. A small side-room or recess for storing utensils, provisions, etc.; a cupboard. (Not very distinct from 4.) The normal N. Amer. usage.

g. Confectionarie or Closet of sweet meats.
g. The Storehouse, and the Closet of our dainties.

g. A Closet full of shelves..it..should therefore be called a Cupboard rather than a Closet.
g. Finch..ran upstairs to his attic room to look over his clothes. He took them from the closet.
g. I had been warned of a few hazards such as..the use of closets rather than cupboards [in the U.S.].
g. 6 room home in immaculate condition. 3 bedrooms, closets galore.

c. skeleton in the closet (or cupboard): a private or concealed trouble in one's house or circumstances, ever present, and ever liable to come into view: see SKELETON n.

d. to come out of the closet: to admit (something) openly, to cease to conceal, esp. one's homosexuality. Opp. to be in the closet.

d. Cf. sense 10 below. slang.

c. Pride of Lions (Columbia Univ.) Apr. 2/1 For those who have come out, tried it and like it, read no more. For those, 'in the closet', you need to read on, get right on!
c. Times 4 June 14/1 It will be nice if those of us who have been slightly shamefaced addicts [of horse-racing] for years can at last come out of the closet.
1978  J. GORES Gone, no Forwarding (1979) xiii. 79  Simson was much straighter-looking..than when his sexual preference had still been in the closet.

1978  M. PUZO Fools Die xli. 453  She was coming out of the closet and without words she was telling the world of her bisexuality.

1985  Lit. Rev. Jan. 5/2  Old Cheever, crowding seventy, has gone Gay. Old Cheever has come out of the closet.


1768  L. STERNE Sentimental Journey II. 200  The little room within..t'was a damp cold closet.

1768–74  A. TUCKER Light of Nature (1852) II. 596  When the family is squeezed up in scanty closets for the sake of having a spacious hall.

1789  P. SMYTH tr. H. Aldrich Archit. (1818) 127  Closets are adapted to the larger apartments.

†5. fig. The den or lair of a wild beast. Obs.

1576  A. FLEMING tr. J. Caius Of Eng. Dogges 11  A Tumbler...This Sort of dogges..doth soddenly gripe it [the beast], at the very..mouth of their receptacles, or closets.

6.

a. transf. That which affords retirement like a private chamber, or which encloses like a cabinet; a hidden or secret place, retreat, recess. †closet of the heart: the pericardium; see also 6b.

1450–1530  Myrr. our Ladye 233  Went the sonne of god oute of the pryuy closet of the maydens wombe.

c1540  (†a1400)  Destr. Troy 11929  The knightes in the closet [the Trojan horse] comyn out swithe.

1594  T. BOWES tr. P. de la Primaudaye French Acad. II. 221  This skinne..is also called the litle closet of the heart.

a1649  W. DRUMMOND Wks. (1711) 51/2  Him, whom..Mary's pure Closet now doth bear.

1663  S. BUTLER Hudibras: First Pt. 1. i. 13  What Adam dreamt of when his Bride Came from her Closet in his side.

1674  N. FAIRFAX Treat. Bulk & Selvedge 147  We see them [our souls] bound..to the narrow closet of a mans body.

b. fig.

1413  LYDGATE Pilgr. of Sowle (1483) V. xiv. 110  Within a lytel closet of his entendement.
7. Short for †‘Closet of ease,’ ‘water-closet’.


8. Heraldry. An ordinary resembling the Bar n. 6), but of half its breadth.

1572 J. Bossewell Wks. Armorie 12 b, A Closet is the halfe of the Barre, and tenne of them maie be borne in one fielde.

1766–87 M. A. Porny Elem. Heraldry iv. 74 The Bar has two Diminutives, the closet which contains half of the Bar, and the Barrulet, which is the half of the closet.


[Translating Latin cloaca: origin doubtful; there is nothing like it in French.]

1533 J. Bellenden tr. Livy Hist. Rome (1822) 70 (Jam.) He drew mony closetts, condittis, and sinks fra the hight of the toune to the..low partis thairof.

1535 W. Stewart tr. H. Boethius Bk. Cron. Scotl. III. 499 Out-throw ane closat quhair the filth did ryn Of all that place.

10.

a. In reference to the closet as a place of privacy, the word was formerly almost adjectival = Private. Obs. exc. as in 10b.

1612–15 Bp. J. Hall Contempl. B iv. (T.), There are stage-sins and there are closet-sins.

1657 R. Austen Treat. Fruit-trees (ed. 2) ii. 159 The secret and closet good works of [God's] people.

1706 J. Drake in Earl of Leicester Secret Mem. Pref., That these were not written for closet memoirs appears by the stile and manner of them.

b. Secret, covert, used esp. with reference to homosexuality; closet queen, a secret male homosexual.
The ‘closet queen’ or so-called latent homosexual becomes a menace to the entire community.

Today’s homosexual can be open (‘come out’) or covert (‘closet’).

A closet queen for the overt community is one who will not admit gayness to straight audiences; for the secret community, it refers to one who will not affiliate with the gay community for fear of stigmatization.

You boys don’t look the [homosexual] type.’ ‘Closet,’ explained O’B.

His colleagues’ retort is that Jimmy is a closet queen because he doesn’t live with a woman.

His defection [to Rome] is a blow because he was not a closet Papist intoxicated by bells and fancy vestments.

**COMPounds**

C1. General attrib. (esp. in sense 1b.)

**closet-candlestick** *n.*

One Closet Candlestick, with Snuffers and Extinguisher.

**closet-chapel** *n.*

What? Severall Closset-Chappells, for those of the same Bed and Board?

**closet-devotion** *n.*

**closet-door** *n.*

**closet-meditation** *n.*

**closet-prayer** *n.*

They cast off..private Duties, as Closet-Prayer.
closet-preparation  n.

1711  LD. SHAFTESBURY Characteristicks (1737) III. 328  [Bp. J. Taylor's Treatises] are in use..as well for church-service as closet-preparation.

closet-religion  n.

closet-vow  n.

C2. With the sense ‘of private study and speculation’.

closet-help  n.


closet-lucubration  n.

1818  B. O'REILLY Greenland 243  Sailing to the north pole has been long a very favourite subject for closet lucubration.

closet-philosopher  n.


closet-politician  n.

1815  T. JEFFERSON Writings (1830) IV. 247  Closet politicians merely, unpractised in the knowledge of men.

closet-reasoner  n.

1782  F. BURNEY Cecilia I. 1. ii. 20  The closet reasoner.

closet-speculation  n.

1803  T. CHALMERS Let. in W. Hanna Mem. T. Chalmers (1851) I. 476  Nature takes her own way, unmindful of the closet speculations of theory.
**closet-student** *n.*

**closet-study** *n.*

**C3.** (In sense 2.)

**closet-chaplain** *n.*

1649  **Milton Eikonoklastos** xxiv. 195  Reasons, why he should rather pray by the officiating mouth of a Closet-Chaplain.

**closet-work** *n.*

1649  **Milton Eikonoklastos** xxiv. 193  They knew the King...to have suckt from them and thir Closetwork all his impotent Principles of Tyrannie and Superstition.

**C4.** (In sense 3.)

a. **closet-keeper** *n.*

1666  **S. Pepys Diary** 8 Apr. (1972) VII. 94  Tom Cheffins..the King's closet-keeper.

1762  **H. Walpole Vertue's Anecd. Painting** II. iii. 116  The office of closet-keeper to the King.

† **closet-draught** *n.* *Obs.*

1691  **J. Norris Pract. Disc. Divine Subj.** 339  These great Master-pieces of his Art, these Closet-Draughts of his Beauty.

b. **closet-picture** *n.* a cabinet drawing or picture.

1721  **London Gaz.** No. 6003/3,  Great choice of the finest Closet Pictures.

**DRAFT ADDITIONS DECEMBER 2005**

**closet case** *n.* *slang (orig. U.S.)* *(a)* an unattractive or embarrassing person, a social outcast; *(b)* a homosexual who conceals
or denies his or her sexuality (cf. sense 10b).

1946 Washington Post 7 Oct. 5/2 Unattractive girls are ‘strictly closet cases’, meaning they should be in the closet when men are around.

1966 Oshkosh (Wisconsin) Daily Northwestern 24 Sept. 22/2 Presidential nominee Barry Goldwater is being treated by Republicans as a campaign closet case this time around.

1969 S. Harris Puritan Jungle x. 191 They're what we call ‘closet cases’, hiding and scared to death of exposure.

2003 Out Feb. 14/1 Out ‘s getting less willing to shower accolades on closet cases who emerge seconds before tabloids push them out.

**DRAFT ADDITIONS SEPTEMBER 2008**

closet drama n. *Literary Criticism* a play intended to be read rather than performed; such plays collectively.

1822 Blackwood's Edinb. Mag. Apr. 448/1 There exists no living dramatic genius, as yet displayed, notwithstanding the late publication of many exquisite closet-dramas.

1908 Times 19 Dec. 11/5 Closet dramas, like closet orations, have no reason for the form which they take, since that form is meant for hearers, not for readers.

2004 Compar. Lit. 56 99 Stage Fright shifts our attention to ‘a seemingly ineradicable and moralizing anti-theatricalism’ central to modernist closet drama.

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