

closet, *n.*

Pronunciation: /'kloʊzɪt/

Forms: Also ME–16 **closett**, 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.*¹ and *-ET suffix*¹. 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.*¹ 2a, 2b; in later use always a small room: see 4.

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

c1374 CHAUCER *Troilus & Criseyde* II. 1215 In a closet for to avyse her bettre, She went alone.

1490 CAXTON tr. *Eneydos* 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 bridegroom 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.

1750 JOHNSON *Rambler* No. 14. ¶3 A sudden intruder into the closet of an author.

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].

c1680 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.

a1600 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) l. 934 Chaplayneȝ to þe chapeles chosen þe gate..þe lorde loutes þerto, & þe lady als, In-to a comly closet coyntly ho entreȝ.

1530 J. PALSGRAVE *Lesclarcissement* 206/1 Closet, *chappelle*.

1549 H. LATIMER *1st Serm. before Kynges Maiestie* (new ed.) sig. D1^v, Shall anye of his sworne chapelins? No. Thei bee of the clausset and kepe close such matters.

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

1565 J. JEWEL *Def. Apol. Churche Eng.* (1611) 104 That S. Peter..sitteth with him [the Pope] in Consistory, or in Clauset, discussing of Cases.

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.

- 1608 SHAKESPEARE *King Lear* x. 11, I haue lockt the letter in my closet.
- a1616 SHAKESPEARE *Julius Caesar* (1623) III. ii. 130 But heere's a Parchment..I found it in his Closset, 'tis his Will.
- [a1616 SHAKESPEARE *Merry Wives of Windsor* (1623) I. iv. 42 Pray you goe and vetch me in my Closset..a Box.]
- 1659 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.
- 1681 MARQUIS OF HALIFAX *Seasonable Addr. Houses of Parl. conc. Succession* 10 The late House of Commons have..seiz'd Closets and Writings without Information.
- 1708 J. CHAMBERLAYNE *Magnæ Britanniae Notitia* (ed. 22) II. I. iii. 375 Silver coins..still preserved in the closets of the curious.
- 1757 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.

- 1616 G. MARKHAM tr. C. Estienne et al. *Maison Rustique* (rev. ed.) v. xxii. 585 The Confectionarie or Closet of sweet meats.
- 1628 G. WITHER *Britain's Remembrancer* I. 198 The Storehouse, and the Closet of our dainties.
- 1799 J. AUSTEN *Let.* 17 May (1995) 40 A Closet full of shelves..it..should therefore be called a Cupboard rather than a Closet.
- 1929 M. DE LA ROCHE *Whiteoaks* xxiv. 333 Finch..ran upstairs to his attic room to look over his clothes. He took them from the closet.
- 1960 *Times* 14 Sept. 12/6, I had been warned of a few hazards such as..the use of closets rather than cupboards [in the U.S.].
- 1968 *Globe & Mail (Toronto)* 17 Feb. 45 (adv.) 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*. Cf. sense 10 below. *slang.*

- 1963 S. PLATH in *London Mag.* Jan. 16 Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.
- 1972 *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!
- 1973 *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.

4. With special reference to size: Any small room: especially one belonging to or communicating with a larger. Common in north of Engl., Scotland, Ireland; **bed-closet**, a small bed-room.

- 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.* I. 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.

1577 M. HANMER tr. Evagrius Scholasticus in *Aunc. Eccl. Hist.* i. xiii. 419 The grace of God beinge resiant in the closset of his breste.

1633 T. STAFFORD *Pacata Hibernia* (1821) ii. 37 Enter..into the Closet of your Conscience.

1862 E. M. GOULBURN *Thoughts Personal Relig.* (1873) iv. 40 The Closet of the heart.

7. Short for †‘Closet of ease,’ ‘water-closet’.

1662 B. GERBIER *Brief Disc. Princ. Building* 27 A Closet of ease.

1869 E. A. PARKES *Man. Pract. Hygiene* (ed. 3) 4 Some persons will use the closet twice daily.

1887 *Spectator* 12 Mar. 345/2 The stench from the overcrowding or from closets is almost unbearable.

8. *Heraldry*. An ordinary resembling the BAR *n.*¹ 6), but of half its breadth.

1572 J. BOSSEWELL *Wks. Armorie* 12 b, A Closset 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.

†9. A sewer. *Sc. Obs.*

[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 closettis, condittis, and sinkis fra the hight of the toun 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.

- 1967 W. CHURCHILL *Homosexual Behavior among Males* ix. 184 The 'closet queen' or so-called latent homosexual becomes a menace..to the entire community.
- 1972 *Sat. Rev. (U.S.)* 12 Feb. 24/3 Today's homosexual can be open ('come out') or covert ('closet').
- 1977 C. A. B. WARREN & B. PONSE in J. D. Douglas & J. M. Johnson *Existential Sociol.* 304 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.
- 1978 J. GORES *Gone, no Forwarding* (1979) xiii. 79 'You boys don't look the [homosexual] type.' 'Closet,' explained O'B.
- 1984 *Mail on Sunday* 2 Dec. (Colour Suppl.) 28/2 His colleagues' retort is that Jimmy is a closet queen because he doesn't live with a woman.
- 1985 *Sunday Tel.* 26 May 17/1 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.*

- 1685 *London Gaz.* No. 2068/4, One Closet Candlestick, with Snuffers and Extinguisher.

closet-chapel *n.*

- 1647 T. FULLER *Good Thoughts in Worse Times* IV. iii. 138 What? Severall Closset-Chappells, for those of the same Bed and Board?

closet-devotion *n.*

closet-door *n.*

closet-meditation *n.*

closet-prayer *n.*

- 1678 J. BUNYAN *Pilgrim's Progress* 216 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.*

1851 F. PALGRAVE *Hist. Normandy & Eng.* I. 61 None of the Desk and Closet-helps for philological study.

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.*

1815 W. PHILLIPS *Outl. Mineral. & Geol.* (1818) 101 The speculations of mere closet-philosophers.

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

closet-work *n.*

1649 MILTON *Εικονοκλαστης* 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.

Oxford University Press

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