

[Pre-publication draft, 2021 - [History Workshop Journal](#), 'Radical Objects' series]

Fergusson Type Speculum, 1860s

This object (fig 1, p.5) is a 'Fergusson' type vaginal speculum, made of glass, with a silver mirrored interior, a black elastic gum coating, and a small viewing window. It was designed to hold open and enable inspection of the vagina and cervix (speculum - *specĕre*: to look (at), observe), usually for medical examinations. While the Fergusson is tubular in shape, specula took a range of forms (figs. 2-5), such as the U-shaped 'Sims' (fig. 2, p.6) which originated through the experiments of the [notorious](#) American gynaecologist J. Marion Sims' (1813-83) on enslaved women and the 'Ricard' or 'Cusco' expanding duck-billed type (fig. 4, p.8) which is the most widespread form still in use today, although a version of the Fergusson is [still manufactured and sold](#). As indicated by their names, Nineteenth-Century specula were often called after their 'inventor' who was typically a surgeon who commissioned and sometimes patented the particular instruments they used. When they were well-known, this became a selling point and the ideal of the lone genius male inventor still clings to these objects. For example, in the case of the 'Fergusson' speculum, it is [described](#) by Wellcome as devised by Sir William Fergusson (1808-77) 'a leading surgeon based in London during the mid-1800s'. This was [contended](#), and its less glamorous origins may have been with a London instrument dealer.

At the time of the manufacture of this object in the 1860s, the use of specula in Greater Britain was most contentious due to the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs), a set of laws first passed in 1864 (27 & 28 Vict. c. 85) and revised in 1866 and 1869. This legislation was introduced in response to the high rate of venereal disease (usually syphilis) among British soldiers and sailors as described and enumerated in a series of [reports](#). In keeping with these military origins, the CDAs generally applied to specific named garrison towns and naval ports in Britain, [Ireland](#) and the wider British Empire including parts of India and [New Zealand](#). A similar regulationist public health regime had been introduced in France in the early Nineteenth Century and extended to Algeria in the 1830s.

The CDAs implicated women, particularly prostitutes, as being the reservoirs of sexually transmitted diseases, and as a threat to the virility and potency of the nation and its empire through the infection of the armed forces. They sought to control this through the frequent compulsory speculum inspection of women deemed to be ‘common prostitutes’, and their registration. Although syphilis was often difficult to observe just through looking through the speculum, if the inspected women were suspected of being infected they were confined, often in specialist ‘Lock’ hospitals. If they refused the examination they could be imprisoned.

In evidence gathered by the extensive [enquiry](#) into the workings of the Acts, this is the only type of speculum specifically named; the naval surgeon Thomas Pickforth testified that ‘the instruments I use are Fergusson’s glass specula and I use the two smallest sizes.’ The voices of the examinees are absent from this evidence, but it is clear that the use of the speculum was often painful and degrading. The report summarises that ‘the statement of women that they have been wounded by the examination, cannot be true of Ferguson’s glass speculum, which is of thick glass and could not break.’ Whilst many informants alleged the inspected women felt no pain, they also said the examinations rarely took more than three minutes, and in [summary](#) that ‘some specula, the expanding one for instance, is very liable to cut in a rapid use of it’, and, ‘if not judiciously managed, a rough introduction (of any kind of speculum) might create an abrasion of the parts.’

The well-known movement to abolish the CDAs, particularly the [Ladies National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts](#) (LNA) [focussed](#) on the curtailment of women’s civil liberties, the unfairness of focussing on women rather than men as agents of disease, the acceptance of prostitution and on ‘instrumental rape’ via the speculum. The LNA leader [Josephine Butler](#) (1828-1906) [published](#) some of the letters sent to her by women subject to the Acts, detailing their sense of violation. One wrote: ‘these monstrous instruments ...they pull them out and push them in, and they turn and twist them about; and if you cry out they stifle you with towels’.

In a [pamphlet](#) of 1870, the homeopathic physician and social reformer JJ Garth Wilkinson (1812-99) called on the Home Secretary to have brought before him the ‘unfeeling glass and steel’ speculum and consider the ‘violent thrust of these things’ into women. That same year, the Liberal MP Jacob Bright [claimed](#) in the House of Commons that ‘some 700 or 800 Petitions, signed by nearly 500,000 persons’ had been presented to parliament asking for repeal of the Acts. Despite campaigns for their retention and even expansion to other cities such as [Dublin](#) and [Liverpool](#), the CDAs were suspended in 1883 following a parliamentary motion that focussed on the forced inspections: [‘That this House disapproves of the compulsory examination of women under the Contagious Diseases Acts’](#). They were finally repealed in 1886, although versions of them persisted in different jurisdictions, including [Cambridge](#).

The speculum is associated with racialised and state-sponsored gynaecological violence through the work of Sims and the CDAs, and [through instances of compulsory inspections of incarcerated women in recent times](#). It was also allied to liberatory politics, most distinctively in the early 1970s in the USA when feminists such as Carol Downer and Lorraine Rothman [learned how to use a speculum when observing an illegal abortion clinic](#) and brought specula and menstrual extraction kits to women’s groups. Feminist health clinics and educational groups as explained in [this](#) documentary (from 38:40), and publications such as *Our Bodies Ourselves* in the USA and *Spare Rib* in the UK promoted self-examination via the speculum, torch and mirror. The speculum thus became symbolic of new self-knowledge. Although such instances of consciousness-raising were critiqued later for reproducing colonialist metaphors of ‘discovery’ by [Donna Haraway](#), others have argued that feminist health advocates were significant for women of different classes and ethnicities to realise greater bodily autonomy.

More recently, the feminist bio-hacking collective [Gynepunk](#) have distributed the means for people to make their own gynaecological instruments and diagnostic tools, including [instructions for a 3-d printed speculum](#), an example of which has been collected by the [Victoria and Albert Museum](#). One of the GynePunk founders, Klau, has also advocated a renaming of the parts of the female reproductive system called after the male scientists and gynaecologists who first ‘identified’ them. Instead, [they propose](#) that they be called after the three named slaves Sims conducted his

experiments on – Anarcha, Lucy and Betsey. Through this action, scientific expertise is aligned not with professionals as in the case of the Fergusson speculum but with those who were intrinsic to the production of the kinds of material knowledge that produce the artefacts around us.

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Please see figures next pages



Figure 1 Fergusson type speculum, England, c.1860s
Wellcome Collection, Science Museum, London

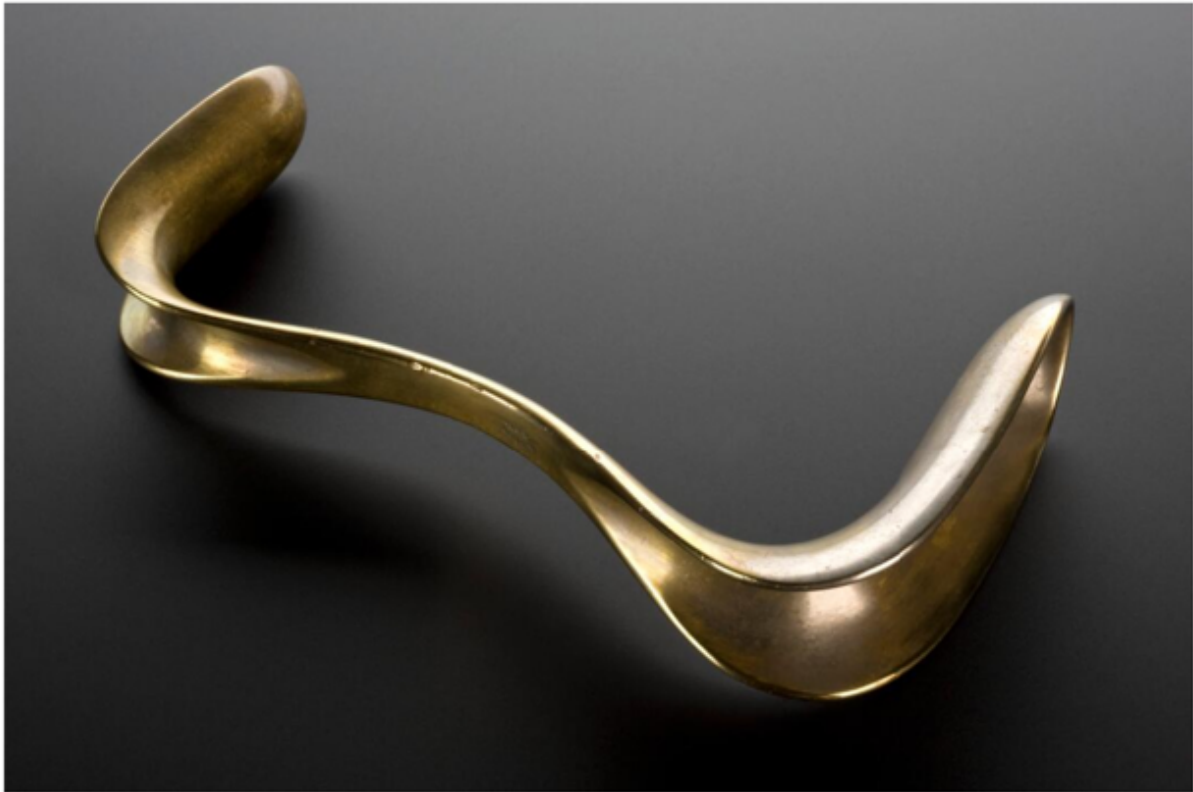


Figure 2 'Simms' Obstetric Speculum. C.1850-1900, USA.
Wellcome Collection, Science Museum, London.

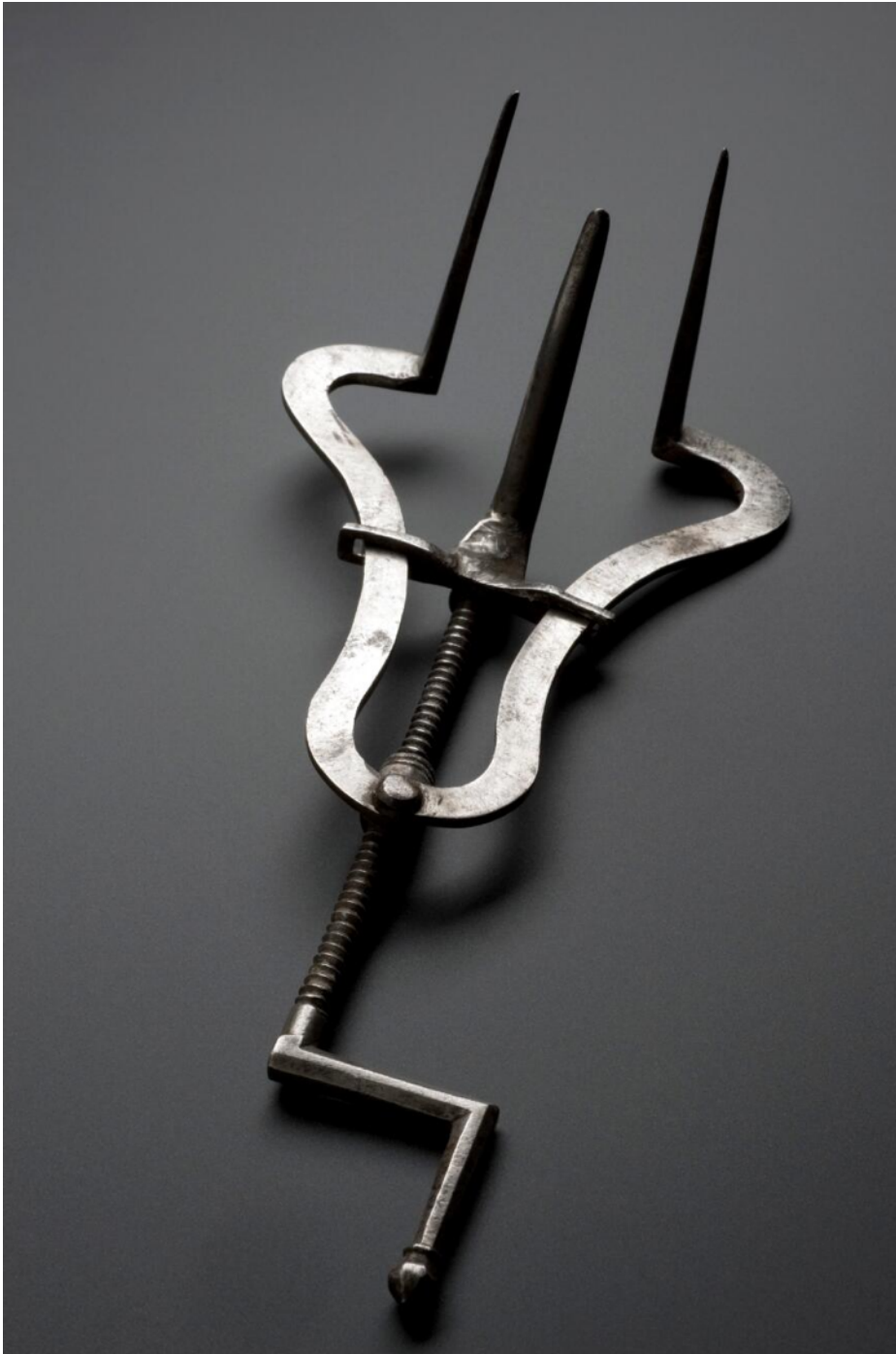


Figure 3 Vaginal speculum, Europe, 1600-1800
Wellcome Collection, Science Museum, London



Figure 4 'Ricard' type speculum, Paris, France, 1801-1900
Wellcome Collection, Science Museum, London



Figure 5 Vaginal speculum, Paris, France, 1851-1900
Wellcome Collection Science Museum, London

[Pre-publication text, 2021 - commissioned for the website of [VARI](#) (Victoria & Albert Museum Research Institute)]

Usership, Design History and the GynePunk 3D-Printed Speculum

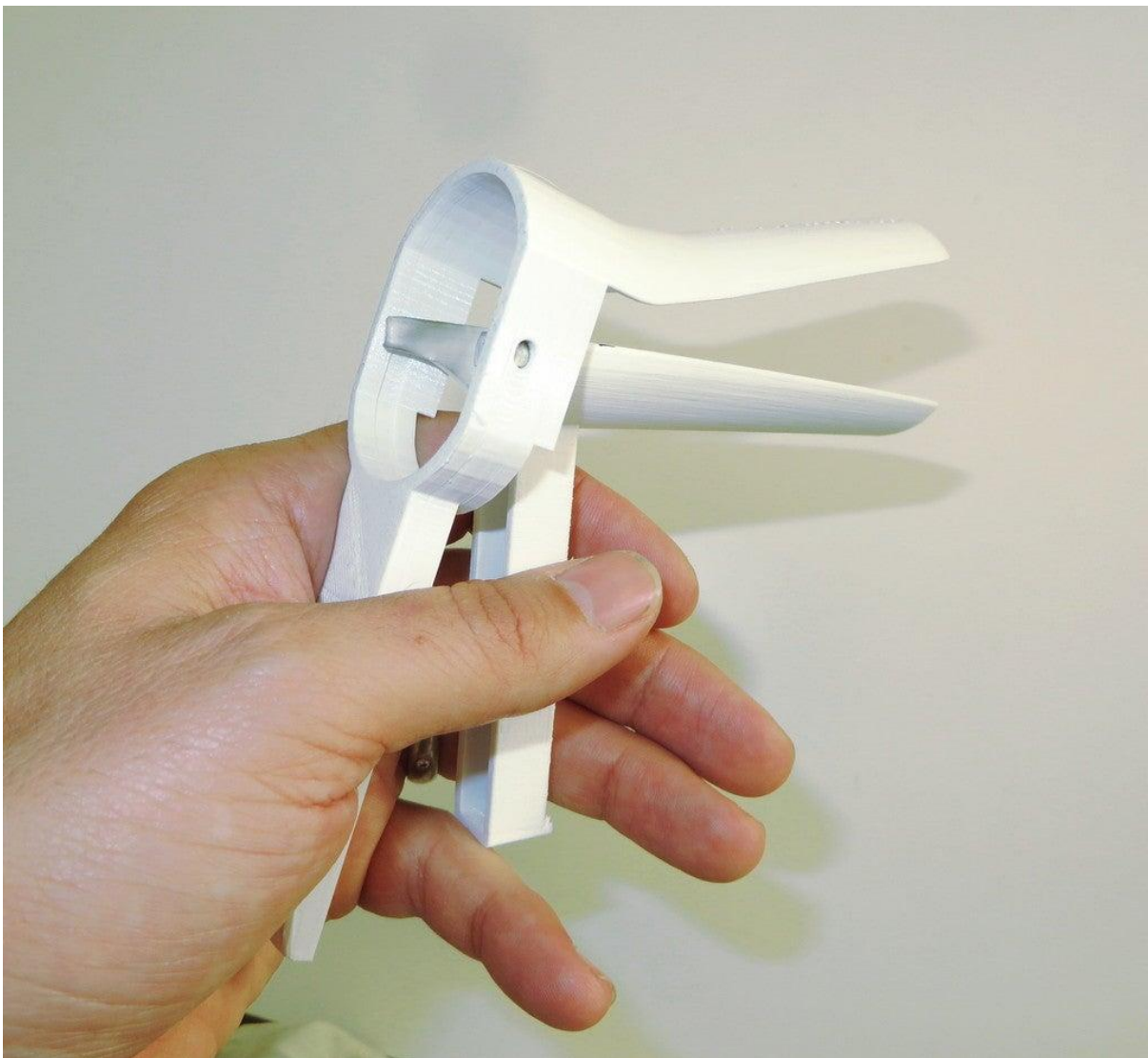
The 3D-printed speculum is associated with the feminist bio-hackers GynePunk. Their work empowers those who are often disadvantaged in gynaecological examinations and diagnoses and has included DIY tools, for example histological equipment that enables the user to analyse their own body fluids at a molecular level. Part of GynePunk's project has been to understand how the often violent history of sexual health has produced certain ways of studying the body, not least through medical instruments such as the vaginal speculum, one form of which was popularised by J. Marion Sims, the so-called 'Father of Gynaecology' who arrived at his insights, including the design of the Sims speculum, through experimental surgeries on slaves in pre-Emancipation Alabama. In acknowledgement that it was through their labour that medical knowledge was produced, GynePunk have re-named parts of female genitalia – officially named after male scientists - 'Anarcha's gland' and 'Lucey and Betsey glands' to honour the women who Sims conducted his painful and multiple experiments on.

The design history of the speculum materialises histories of visibility and materiality, of looking and the regulation of women. The ostensible function of the instrument is that it is inserted into the vagina, most typically in medical examinations, to dilate, hold open and enable the inspection of the cervix uteri. The origins of its name are from the Latin word *specĕre*: to look (at), observe, and so the affordance of visualising is built into the word and the form of the speculum itself. Most commonly involving 'blades' that can be expanded internally and a 'site' through which the user can look, its design has always been predicated on a function of vision. While some rare examples exist from the Ancient Roman empire, in Europe specula only became widespread again in the early modern period, and have been described by medical historians in relation to the gradual displacement of midwifery by male professional medics, and a shift in the birthing arts from knowing through touch to knowing through seeing.

The history of the speculum is also associated with the Contagious Diseases Acts, first passed in 1864. This legislation was enforced in certain garrison towns and ports in Britain and its empire and allowed for the mandatory vaginal examination of women suspected of 'common prostitution' in an attempt to stem the high rate of syphilis amongst soldiers and sailors. This was scientifically dubious as the symptoms could not easily be observed by speculum, and those subject to the law testified to feeling brutalised and often injured by its use. The design of the speculum championed its use to visualise at the expense of the feeling, often prostrate woman being examined.

When we look at the 3-D speculum, we're seeing not an actual instrument that might be used for a medical exam, but a representation of a conventional instrument that is still configured for a user that both holds and looks through it. As such, it materialises not an ideal design for self-knowledge, but rather an aspiration that the violent history of its use be addressed, and perhaps the instrument be redesigned to account for users at both ends of the speculum.

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