

DR SAMUEL POZZI- HIS LIFE AND WORK, AND MADAME SARAH BERNHARDT



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Ladies and gentlemen, my dear colleagues

It's a great pleasure to be here and I would like to thank the organisers of the Congress for their invitation, in particular Michel Dagues-Bié. I'd also like to thank the very lovely Saliah Gana, director of obstetrics at the

Samuel Pozzi Hospital in Bergerac, whom I first met last year and who has been of great assistance to me, and Christophe Normand, director of Euromedial Gyneco and maker of the Pozzi forceps; he has been most generous.

So ... what is an Australian woman doing here talking about a man often described as 'the father of French gynaecology', the first professor of gynaecology in the University of Paris, and dead for almost a century.



Professor Samuel Pozzi teaching in the Paris School of Medicine

I am myself a gynaecologist (and obstetrician) and the history of our specialty has always interested me. I have extensively researched the 19th century, the era in which our discipline became science-



Portrait of Samuel Pozzi by John Singer Sargent

based. I have carried out my research in London, and in Paris in the National Library and at the library in the archives of the School of Medicine in the 5th arrondissement. I have come across many interesting articles by 'S.Pozzi'- whom at first I assumed to be Italian. And it was in London in the warm comfort of the Wellcome Library that I became acquainted with his Treatise of Gynaecology, published in Paris in 1890, and soon translated into English, German and other languages, and highly esteemed by a large number of gynaecologists in Europe and the United States.

But of Pozzi himself I knew almost nothing, until I received several emails from a woman living in Los Angeles – a woman whom I had never met, Francesca Miller, a journalist and an expert on the work of the American painter John Singer Sargent.

She had always admired the portrait of Pozzi painted by Sargent and hung in the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. We exchanged many emails and I decided to travel to LA to meet her. We searched for ancient books in obscure libraries both American and

European, and we began to learn more of Samuel Pozzi's life outside of his formidable medical career, as politician, traveler, collector, writer, and friend of 'all Paris'. We wished, and we still wish, to restore and revitalise Pozzi's public image, particularly in the United States, where various curators of Sargent exhibitions have given the impression that Pozzi was nothing but a worldly doctor who seduced large numbers of women.



In 2006 I first made the acquaintance of Nicolas Bourdet, great grandson of Samuel Pozzi. He is now a good friend, and he has given me unfettered access to his immense and valuable collection, of journals and letters of Samuel Pozzi. There are for example letters from Clemenceau, who studied medicine with Pozzi and was a lifelong friend, from Professor Paul Broca, from De Maupassant, and from Charles Darwin, for whom Pozzi translated one of his last and most important works, Pozzi himself speaking excellent English. There is also an immense correspondence between Pozzi and surgeons both in Europe and in the United States, including the Mayo brothers.

Francesca and I published a number of articles about Pozzi based on these materials. We were considering a biography, but we wondered if the 21st century public would be as interested as we were in this man.

Sarah Bernhardt

At that point Nicolas produced from deep in his archives a tattered cardboard box, and said to me: 'Here are some old letters from Sarah Bernhardt to Pozzi; I don't think they would interest you. They seem quite frivolous to me.'

Wow! Sarah Bernhardt! I discovered around one hundred letters from Sarah to Samuel – many of which were just short notes scrawled in pencil between rehearsals, or telegrams (Sarah Bernhardt would have adored the cellphone and Twitter) – but others were quite long. The majority of the letters had never been published. They unveil for the reader a fascinating story of the close relationship between Bernhardt and Pozzi, sexual although intermittently between 1869 and 1879, then platonic up until Pozzi's death in 1918. He was always her 'Doctor God' and he continued to provide medical advice for herself, her family and her friends throughout his life. For him she was always 'the divine Sarah' and he attended every one of her performances when he was in Paris. Unfortunately, all letters from him to her have been lost; Bernhardt was notorious for destroying her correspondence. Therefore, we based our story of their lives around her letters alone.



La Graulet

So...having explained my research and my sources, I will speak to you of Pozzi. Born in Bergerac, eldest son of a Protestant pastor, he grew up un Bergerac, in the family house on the farm of La Graulet, and also in Bordeaux, and here in Pau., where his father had parishioners. After studying at the lycée in Bordeaux, Samuel passed his *bac* exams brilliantly.

He had decided to study medicine, perhaps influenced by the death of his mother when he was quite young, and that of his sister Marie, who died at the age of sixteen.



Samuel Pozzi aged 16

He began his studies at the School of Medicine in Paris, working hard to prepare for the challenging *internat* exam.

At the same time he was attached each day for his clinical experience to the services of the hospitals of Paris, including that of the Lariboisière a certain Professor Gallard was interested in the diseases of women that other doctors regarded with indifference. Samuel saw for the first time in this service cysts of the ovary that were so large that they appeared like advanced pregnancies; cancers which ate away at the guts of young women, and bladder fistulas caused by prolonged labour in an era when caesarean section had yet to be introduced. Gynaecology was not yet recognized as a separate discipline, for few treatments were in existence. The young Pozzi told himself that this was where he would make his contribution.

‘I will never forget those demeaning mutilations, the sequels of pleasure and of maternity,’ he later wrote, in reference to Gallard’s service.

Samuel passed the *internat* with great success. But his studies were interrupted by the war of 1870. Like the majority of his student colleagues, Samuel joined the army, with the rank of assistant major second class.



Pozzi in his early twenties

But he had to wait impatiently for nearly a month in Paris, before being sent to a hospital near the front. Finally, when his convoy reached Sedan the Prussians had already won. However, the young doctor was able to be involved directly in the emergency services. That was where he saw soldiers dying from infected wounds, or peritonitis after abdominal injuries. These monstrous scenes would always remain engraved in his mind and influence his practice of surgery.

He returned to Paris with his regiment and set about helping to prepare the defence of the city; he would live there throughout the Siege and the Commune. Despite the difficult circumstance he was delighted to make the acquaintance of Charles Leconte de Lisle, the renowned poet, who lived close to Samuel's military post; the elderly man of letters had volunteered in the National Guard. Their friendship enabled the young doctor to be admitted, after the war, to the highest circles of writers and artists of Paris. During the events of 1870-71 Pozzi abandoned his Protestant faith; he became agnostic and one could also say, humanist.

During the years 1871-75 he continued his studies, directing himself towards surgery, and his clinical posts were in several surgical services: at the la Charité, La Pitié and Lourcine-Pascal hospitals among others.



Pozzi and colleagues at La Pitié

For his doctorate thesis in 1872 his topic was a general surgical one: a study of fistulas of the rectum. For this he received the gold medal of the *internat* for that year. In 1875 a second these gave him the title of *agrégé* (a recognition of academic merit enabling him to teach in the University of Paris). The subject of this thesis – the surgical treatment of uterine fibroids – shows the direction his interests were now taking. And indeed, the treatment of uterine fibroids continues to interest us to this day, notably at this Congress, even though our approach is now with the laparoscope.

The young surgeon had attracted the attention of his superiors; at La Pitié in particular he had been noticed by Paul Broca, himself a surgeon but also the founder of the French Society of Anthropology. Broca was a friend of Charles Darwin and arranged for Pozzi to translate one of Darwin's last works into French.

In 1876 Pozzi took himself to Scotland to visit the services of Joseph Lister. Lister had stated that the use of carbolic acid and phenol in surgical practice could prevent infection of surgical wounds. He had published his findings in a series of articles in the British Medical Journal, which Pozzi had read and he had also read an article by Justin-Lucas Champonnière, the first French doctor to take note of the findings of Lister. Both Pozzi and Champonnière had seen the terrible toll infected wounds had taken on the soldiers of the war of 1870.

Pozzi understood from Lister's reports that the mortality rate among patients who had limbs amputated on Lister's own service had fallen from 50 to 15 percent, thanks to a reduction in the incidence of infection. In spite of the obvious success of Lister's methods, numerous colleagues of Lister hesitated to convert to 'Listerism', which was regarded more like a religious belief than a scientific fact in their minds.

Pozzi returned to France completely convinced of the importance of Lister's techniques. He decided to establish a rigorous operating protocol for himself, in order to see how Listerism might work outside Scotland. He began at La Pitié, where Broca gave him his complete support. He introduced the washing of hands; following washing the surgeons' hands had to be immersed- like the instruments, sponges and suture materials – in a light solution of phenol. Immediately following the surgical procedure, he applied layers of sterile bandages, which had been soaked in phenol. His results were impressive. However, Lister's methods were still being regarded as revolutionary at the time, and Pozzi was considered a fool by a good number of his colleagues, although the practice of antisepsis continued in Broca's service. However, for many years Samuel regarded with terror colleagues who, after submerging their hands in phenol according to the protocols, would scratch their heads in the course of the surgery, or wipe their scalpel with their pocket handkerchief. And that was all despite the fact that Louis, the great pioneer of microbiology, was French and worked in Paris! Happily, though, knowledge about the necessity of antisepsis in surgical practice spread slowly through the profession.

In 1875 Pozzi began to develop a private practice, first in the rue Boissy d'Anglas and then in his rooms in the Place Vendôme, where he moved after his marriage in 1879 to Thérèse Loth-Cazalis, only daughter of a family from Lyon who had built their fortune under the Empire speculating in railway construction. Unfortunately for the marriage, the mother of Thérèse came to Paris with her daughter and set herself up close to the Place Vendôme.

All surgery for private patients at the time was performed in the patients' own homes, as was normal at the time. Pozzi transported his own instruments, drapes, phenol and carbolic acid, and he invited his colleagues to assist him.

He also worked in the public hospitals of Paris; until 1883 as a locum. In that year he was made Director of the surgical service in the Lourcine-Pascal Hospital.

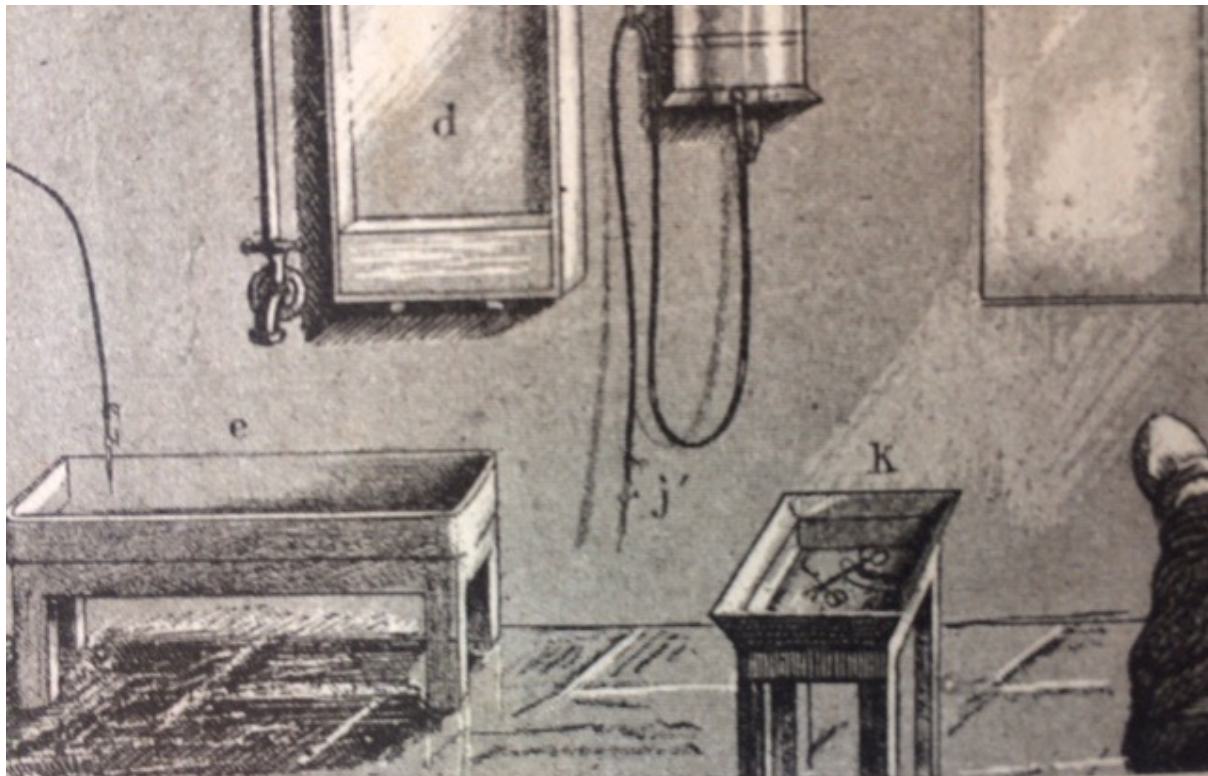


Fig. 1. — Salle d'opérations gynécologiques (Lourcine-Pascal). D

Lourcine-Pascal hospital

Within the ancient walls of the hospital were two services for women suffering advanced syphilis and other sexually-transmitted diseases. His predecessors had no interest in the diseases of women's reproductive organs.

In the garden of the hospital Pozzi found two outbuildings put up rapidly the previous year to cope with an outbreak of typhoid. After insistent demands to the Parisian public health authorities he was permitted to use one of these buildings, which contained twenty beds. He also obtained the services of a second intern, and he declared, audaciously: 'This will be the first gynaecological surgery service in Paris.'

There was no operating theatre when he first began, and practically no instruments apart from what he owned himself. He operated with his interns on the patient's bed. Little by little he made improvements. Certain walls were taken down and window bays installed to allow light into the wards., taps with running water appeared, as well as porcelain bowls for the sterilisation of instruments and hands. A part of the building, set aside behind a wall, became the first operating theatre for Pozzi at Lourcine-Pascal. The operating table was a simple plank mounted on trestles, and the surgeon, seated on a dining room chair between the thighs of the patient, wore an apron over his normal suit; 'scrubs' had yet to be thought of.

The post of Pozzi at Lourcine-Pascal (later renamed in memory of Paul Broca) would be his first and his last post as director of a surgical service in Paris. For thirty years he worked there caring for the poorer women of Paris.

In 1889 Pozzi oversaw the refurbishment of the Broca. He invited a number of friends, artists, to come to paint the walls, most notably Georges Clairin, who painted the very beautiful fresco 'Health restored to the sick' which now belongs to the Museum of l'Assistance Publique; unfortunately, the Museum has now been closed for seven years. The model for the central character in the fresco is Sarah Bernhardt.

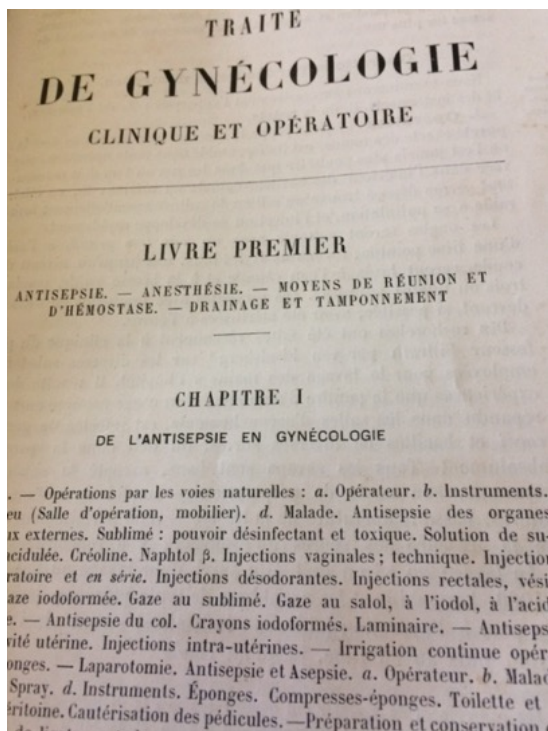


Health restored to the sick, fresco by Georges Clairin

The Broca retained its gynaecological services until 1973. The contribution of Pozzi to the health of the poorest women in Paris was well recognised in his lifetime: postcards of his picture were sold in

the streets. Today, the new Broca hospital, an unremarkable late 20th century building still on the same site in the 13th arrondissement, has become a geriatric centre.

In the course of the 1880s, while developing and perfecting his surgical techniques and establishing his gynaecology service, Pozzi continued to read and collect every bit of information about the practice of this new discipline. Each year he arranged visits to Germany, Austria and Britain, to attend conferences and observe the operative techniques of his colleagues. He himself also authored more than 400 scientific papers in his professional career. However there existed no complete and up-to-date textbook of gynaecology. 'The great surgical treatises are in German; the slim volumes in French date from before the introduction of antiseptics and laparotomy,' he wrote. 'A treatise in French is needed.' The idea slowly made its way into his mind: he himself would write such a work, which would represent the sum of all knowledge of the subject at the time.



Treatise on gynaecology

In our era it is normal for medical textbooks to be written by a number of authors, each contributing one or more chapters in their particular specialty to an editor. In 1888, Samuel Pozzi decided to do it all himself. He wrote with pen and ink, cut with scissors and pasted with glue, completing all his chapters with references and bibliography. By the end of 1889 it was done – more than 1000 pages, written in his own precise but fluid style, a Tolstoyan achievement.

It was first published in Paris in 1890, *Le traité de gynécologie clinique et opératoire*, in two volumes. The second French edition would be published in 1892, by which time the work was already translated into five other languages. This exceptional work is strong evidence of Pozzi's meticulous attention to

detail in his surgical practice, and the great breadth of his knowledge.

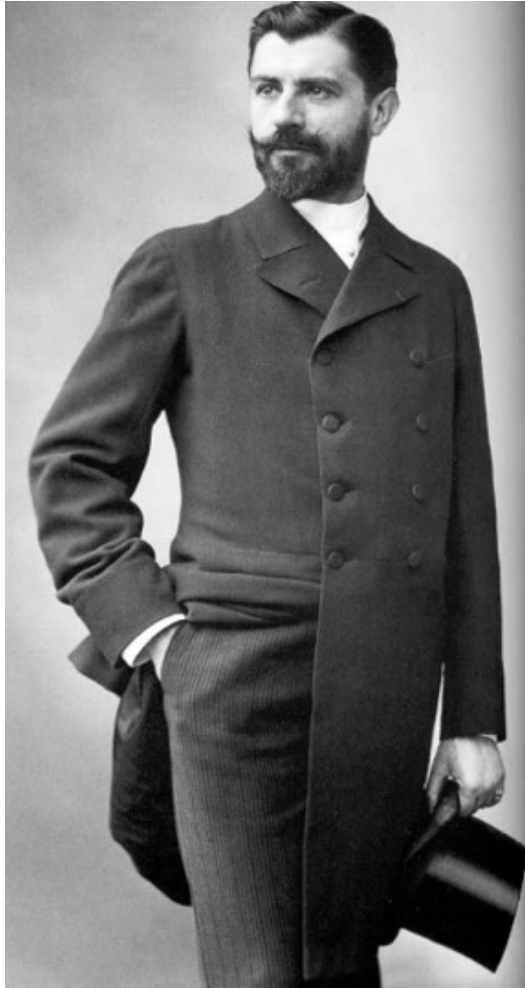
The book starts with a comprehensive explanation of the principles of antiseptics and anaesthesia for surgery, before moving on to surgical technique and post-operative care. Greatly enhanced by more than 500 hand-drawn figures, the majority based on sketches by Pozzi himself, the Treatise rapidly became the seminal text for gynaecological surgery, and remained so until the 1930s.

The tone Pozzi adopts is immensely interesting, even for those readers with no knowledge of gynaecology. Respectful and instructive, it claims for women the place they should by rights occupy within medical specialization. He emphasizes the importance of listening attentively to the woman when taking a history and taking note of her own personal symptoms, in order to be able to reach a diagnosis and a prognosis. Before performing a vaginal examination, doctors should wash their hands with an antiseptic solution (rubber surgical and examination were not developed until later in the 1890s). If using a metal speculum, immerse it first in warm sterilised water, to make the examination more comfortable for the woman. For every woman choose the most comfortable position for her and the most appropriate speculum. By following these principles, Pozzi said, the examination will yield the best clinical information.

So while today it may seem that we have nothing of Pozzi remaining in our practice except the Pozzi forceps (now in its reincarnation from Christophe Normand's firm), in fact his contribution to our basic clinical expertise was enormous. Even though today we can use ultrasound, tomography, MRI and PET scans, and we have a range of treatments both surgical and non-surgical (hormones, antibiotics), the principles established in the last decades of the 19th century by Pozzi and his colleagues underpin our practice.

Outside his professional career Samuel Pozzi had an active and brilliant life; his friends were the artists, poets, writers, musicians, collectors, and the women who ran the salons of Parisian society. Particularly worthy of remark is Pozzi's long friendship with the Proust family. Doctor Adrien Proust was a colleague and close friend; his son Robert became a surgeon and was Pozzi's assistant for ten years at the Broca. Robert's brother, Marcel, was invited to the Pozzi home in the Place Vendôme when he was fifteen, for his first adult dinner in Paris society, an experience that no doubt served him well when he came to describe such events in future literary masterpieces.

It has been said that Proust was inspired by Pozzi to create the character of Dr Cottard in *In Search of Lost Time*. Given the rather unpleasant personality of Cottard and the constant affection of Marcel for Samuel, this seems unlikely, and that other acquaintances were in fact the basis of Cottard's character. Pozzi and the Proust family were also intimate friends of Geneviève Straus (model for the duchess of Guermantes in *In Search*) and her husband Emile.



Pozzi in 1889

After Pozzi's death, Marcel Proust wrote to Madame Straus that 'I am thinking of his goodness, his intelligence, his talent, his beauty, and of the veneration I always maintained for him in the old days that you speak of...(as did) my brother who adored and worshiped Pozzi...'

I'll turn again to Pozzi's personal life. In 1889. Soon after their marriage and thanks to the Loth-Cazalis fortune, Samuel and his wife left their apartment on the boulevard Saint-Germain to set up house in the Place Vendôme. Once settled in there, the young marrieds began a very active social life.

Their guests came from diverse backgrounds. 'The friends and clients of the brilliant professor were already legion; thus, there were dinners and parties, sometimes several times a week,' wrote Gustave Schlumberger, friend of Pozzi and a noted historian. 'In my memory these dinners were among the most amusing I ever attended.' Not only did the Pozzis receive at home, they were also welcomed into

numerous Parisian salons. Doctors and surgeons were much appreciated by the best-known hostesses of Belle Epoque Paris. It was considered very stylish to 'have' a professor medicine for one's salon; to be received at his home was equally acceptable.

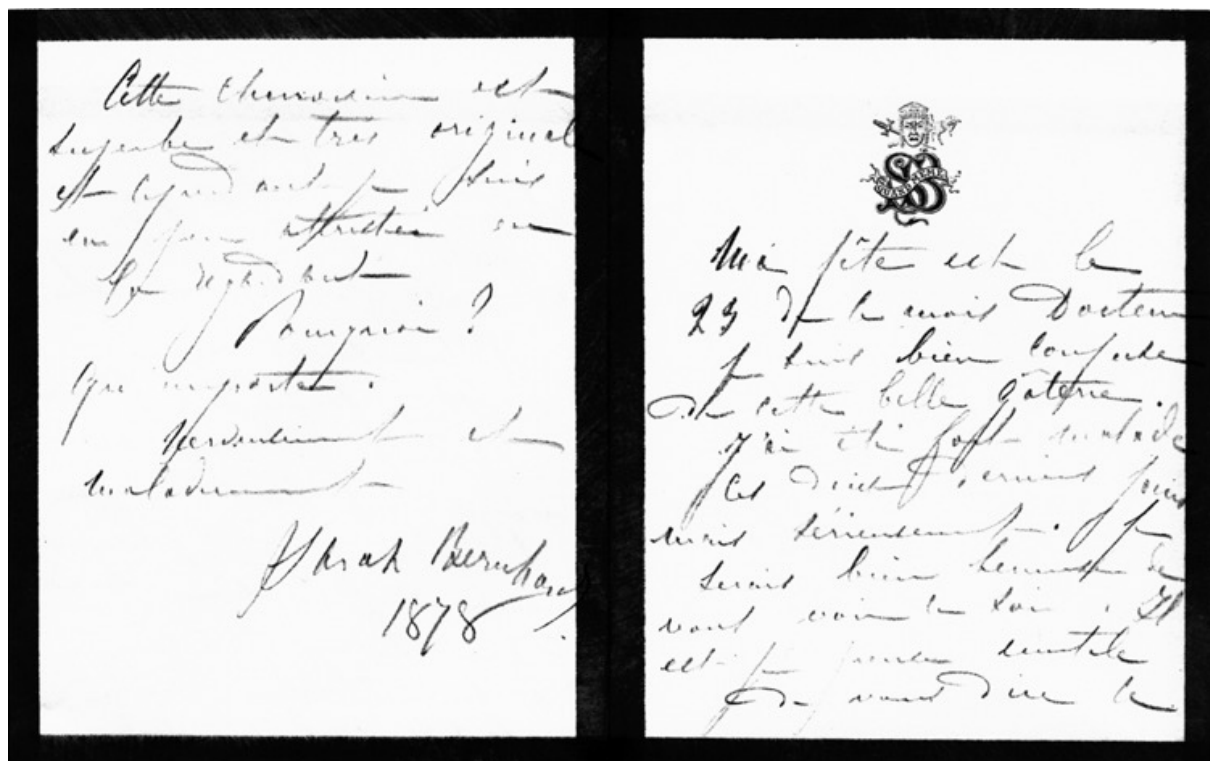
It must be said that Sarah Bernhardt was often an invitee, and she might recite for the guests, above all from the works of Pozzi's old friend Leconte de Lisle, who was also frequently present.

Aah! Sarah Bernhardt...

Sarah and Samuel first met just before the war of 1870. According to Schlumberger, who knew them both at the time, the attraction was immediate and dazzling. 'An immense love story, as theatrical as one could wish, magnificently played by two incomparable actors, one known throughout the world, the other, "my Doctor God", resting in the shadows. Young but not too young – she was two years his senior – beautiful, courageous, passionate.'

They became lovers, and their physical relationship lasted for ten years, albeit intermittently. In 1878 the star was still sending ardent messages and telegrams to Pozzi, sometimes three or four times a day. 'My much wanted Sam, my much loved master, I am yours to die of love for, I am yours until madness. What is this all about? Anyway, this evening I will see you. I slept badly, Lazare and I were thinking of you and we consoled each other by talking of Samuel. My lips give you a wake-up kiss, Your Sarah' she declared in a note written between two scenes of a rehearsal'. The same day she scribbled another message: 'My Sam I love you. I love you and am yours what a sad night you made me pass. Anyway, until this evening...Come and take me if you can great will be my pleasure Sarah Bernhardt.' And then a third message: 'I adore you my Samuel your Sarah. 'Sarah was passionately in love. According to some recent speculations by American writers Bernhardt never experienced orgasm, despite her many lovers. Only an American could make such a claim, and I am certain that in the hands of the young Dr Pozzi this was not the case.

Following Samuel's marriage, their ardour was transformed into a deep and sincere friendship that lasted until Pozzi's death in 1918. She wrote to him in 1915:



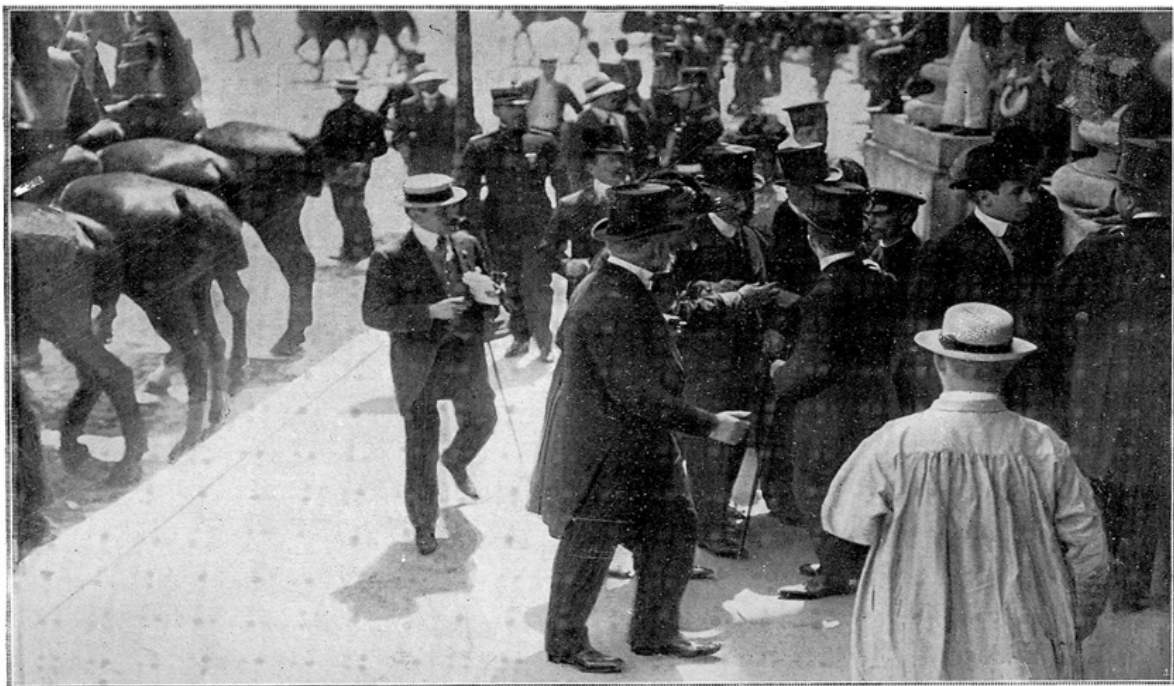
Letter to Pozzi from Sarah Bernhardt

'My Doctor God, how is that my infinite tenderness and my longstanding attachment for so many years have not flowered in your heart? Why do I need to tell you again and again that no-one is more

dear to me than you?...I adore you with all the living and intellectual force of my being and nothing, nothing can change this sentiment, greater than friendship, more spiritual than love. Sarah.'

For her, he was always her Doctor God. In the course of her incessant travels in Europe, to North and south America and even Australia, she always consulted him in medical matters. In 1898 she would allow only him to operate on a large ovarian cyst she was suffering from. He performed this task entirely successfully, though not without some apprehension. She invited him to her evening gatherings and dinners in Paris, and in her house in Brittany, above all on her birthday and that of her son Maurice. Remembering Pozzi's translation of Darwin, when she bought a pet chimpanzee, she named him Darwin.

At the end of the 19th century they both supported Captain Alfred Dreyfus in the Affair that divided France. Bernhardt wrote an open letter to Zola after the publication of *J'accuse*. Pozzi was a friend of Zola, of Clemenceau and of Joseph Reinach and of many other supporters of the Captain. He was present, as a Senator from the Dordogne region, at the second trial of Dreyfus in Rennes, in 1898. Pozzi was always strongly opposed to anti-Semitism. In 1908, during the ceremony to transfer the ashes of Zola to the Pantheon, Dreyfus was standing beside Pozzi when a certain Grégori, a journalist fiercely opposed to Dreyfus, opened fire on the Captain, wounding him with a bullet in his arm. Pozzi sprang to his aid, ignoring any personal danger, which earned him the lasting gratitude of Dreyfus.



Blessé, le commandant Dreyfus (en chapeau haut de forme, au centre du groupe, et le poignet soutenu par le docteur Pozzi, en uniforme d'aodémicien) est accompagné à la mairie du Panthéon pour un premier pansement.

Pozzi attending to the wounded Dreyfus



Pozzi in uniform again

In 1914 at the outbreak of World War I, Pozzi re-enlisted as a military surgeon, at the age of 68. He worked in Paris, in hospitals established temporarily in private houses, as well as at the Broca and in his private practice.

In 1904 Bernhardt had twisted her right knee while playing Tosca and had suffered increasing pain ever since. In 1915, designated by Clemenceau as a 'national treasure', she had been persuaded to move to Andernos (near to Bordeaux) from where she wrote to Pozzi:

'Then listen to me, my adored friend, I beg you to cut off my leg a bit above the knee. Don't protest; I have perhaps ten or fifteen years left to live. Why condemn me to suffering?

Note, I pray you, that with a splint in plaster or celluloid I will still be in difficulties no matter what, and not able to perform, and horror of horrors. I will always be suffering...'

Pozzi was unable to leave Paris but he arranged for his former intern, Professor Jean Denucé, to perform an above-knee amputation. One day in February 1915 the greatest actress of France, clad in a silk dressing gown, arrived on a trolley in the operating theatre of Denucé, courageously humming the opening bars of the Marseillaise. It took just fifteen minutes for Denucé to complete the procedure, already standard in surgical practice. Afterwards he sent a telegram to Pozzi: 'Operation done. Very quick. No complications. Minimum of ether used. All went well.'

Sarah recovered quickly and continued to perform, in the theatre, as well as very close to the front for the troops during the remaining war years, and even afterwards, until her death in 1923.

In regard to the death of Pozzi it must be said that he departed this life with panache. One evening in June 1918 he had just returned home from the military hospital when a former patient, a man Pozzi had previously described as 'a nut', fired at him several times, after which he suicided. Pozzi, still alive, was transported to a military hospital established in the nearby Astoria Hotel, where his former intern Thierry de Martel was working. On arrival Pozzi said to Martel: 'I'm so sorry to spoil your evening, dear friend, but I'm afraid I've got at least one shot in the guts.'. Several other surgeons arrived and even Clemenceau. Marten undertook emergency surgery, but the bullet had penetrated an iliac vein and he was unable to stem the bleeding. Under the eyes of his colleagues and the Prime Minister of France Pozzi passed away. He lies today in the Protestant cemetery in Bergerac.

Was Samuel Pozzi a feminist before his time? I think not, even if several women worked as his interns at the Broca. The ideas of the rights of women in regard to their reproductive organs did not exist in his lifetime. However, I believe he showed great respect for women and for the intelligence of women. He understood the importance of gynaecology as a discipline in its own right. He understood that around each uterus there is a woman, an essential piece of knowledge for every doctor.

Was Sarah Bernhardt a feminist? Again, I think no. But she was a single mother who brought up her son herself, with pride, all the while having an exceptional career. She was a unique individual and a role model for all women even today.

I continue to be fascinated by these two extraordinary personalities, whose lives intermingled over nearly fifty years. I hope that I have succeeded in sharing my feelings with you.

Merci

Caroline de Costa

