

THE DIVA AND DOCTOR GOD

Letters from Sarah Bernhardt
to Doctor Samuel Pozzi



Caroline de Costa and
Francesca Miller

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The French actress Sarah Bernhardt, the “*first international superstar*,” died nearly one hundred years ago, but she continues to fascinate an audience around the world. While biographies keep appearing and the Internet does a brisk trade in photos of Sarah in her many roles, little that is new has been published about her life in at least twenty years.

Dr. Samuel Pozzi is often mentioned in passing by her biographers as a friend and physician to the star, but scant attention has been paid to his relationship with her throughout their lives. This is surprising, considering that Bernhardt and Pozzi were lovers for the ten years from 1869 and that their sexual liaison then morphed into a deep and sincere friendship lasting until his death in 1918. He was perhaps her oldest and closest friend.

Dr. Pozzi was also a striking character in his own right—not only was he a brilliant surgeon who pioneered much early surgery for women and was known as “the father of French gynecology,” but he was also a writer, anthropologist, politician, art collector, and patron of the arts. Yet he is scarcely known now in France and even less so in the English-speaking world. Regrettably, his dramatic portrait by John Singer Sargent—first displayed to the public by the Armand Hammer Museum in 1991 and shown on the back of this book—has produced in the United States a stream of speculation about his life that has little basis in documented fact.

In writing *The Diva and Doctor God*, the authors have had access to more than one hundred letters and telegrams from Sarah Bernhardt to Samuel Pozzi, from the private archives in Paris of Pozzi’s great-grandson Nicolas Bourdet. Most of these have never been published. While many

are very short notes, the sense of the close relationship between the two across almost fifty years is well conveyed. Around these letters has been woven the little-known story of Bernhardt and Pozzi, which has allowed the authors also to recount the most interesting aspects of Pozzi's life as well as the enormous contribution he made to improving women's reproductive health.

The Authors



Caroline de Costa is professor of obstetrics and gynecology at James Cook University School of Medicine in Cairns, North Queensland, Australia, and a practicing obstetrician and gynecologist. She has published many books in the United States and Australia, including books of information for women on reproductive health, popular textbooks for medical students, and three novels. She has a particular interest in the health of indigenous Australian women and women from recently arrived immigrant groups and has been

a strong advocate for improvements in women's healthcare in Australia. She also has an interest in the history of gynecology and has published widely in this area. Aside from her medical qualifications, she has a degree in French language and literature. She is the mother of seven children and lives in Cairns with her husband, a surgeon. For further information, see www.carolinedecosta.com.

Francesca Miller has spent much of her professional life as an entertainment journalist and movie reviewer in print, online, and on radio. She has worked as an editor for magazines in Los Angeles, Seattle, Canada, New York, and San Francisco; interviewed a number of Hollywood luminaries; written numerous puff pieces; and critiqued hundreds of films. She



is a member of Romance Writers of America and the International Press Academy. With Caroline, she has coauthored articles on Samuel Pozzi and Sarah Bernhardt for *The Lancet* and *History Today*. She has completed two works of fiction and is presently working on a crime novel about New Orleans in the 1950s. For further information, see www.francescamiller.com.

INDICATIONS DE SERVICE.

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Telegramme.



Pour Paris Cal. de Paris Courcelles. 1887/21. Mois 16. Dépôt le 17 à h. 46. da 9

Receur: Poyze P. J. L. Lemaire
Paris

Je compte absolument sur vous.
Bonne nuit. 10 heures J.
Léon Bernhardt

Permettez 1887. — Modèle n° 215.

Dans les dépêches imprimées en caractères romains par l'appareil télégraphique, le premier nombre qui figure après le nom du lieu d'origine est un numéro d'ordre, le second indique le nombre des zones traversées, les autres désignent la date et l'heure de départ. L'Etat s'est réservé à toutes responsabilités le service de la correspondance par le télégraphe. (Loi de 15 novembre 1876, art. 5.)

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, we must give our heartfelt thanks to Nicolas Bourdet, great-grandson of Samuel Pozzi and grandson of Catherine Pozzi. Nicolas holds in Paris an extensive archive of personal papers, diaries, and correspondence left by Samuel Pozzi, as well as books, drawings, and reports from newspapers and professional journals from 1878 until the 1930s. This rich source of material has been made freely available to Caroline who has made numerous visits to Paris to conduct research into the life of Pozzi. There is also a remarkable collection of photographs, some of which are reproduced in this book, as well as the invaluable family knowledge of Nicolas himself. We would also like to thank Mireille Cardot, who—with Nicolas—transcribed the Bernhardt letters in 2006—a daunting task given that more than 130 years have passed since the Divine Sarah hastily scrawled many of these messages on frail sheets of perfumed paper, between scenes at rehearsal.

We also acknowledge the help we obtained from Dr. Claude Vanderpooten, author of the 1993 biography of Pozzi in French, who was very enthusiastic about the idea of a Pozzi biography in English. We were in touch with Dr. Vanderpooten in 2006 through Madame Marie-Véronique Clin, director of the Museum of Medical History at the School of Medicine in Paris, to whom we also extend our thanks. We have appreciated the help too of the staff of the library at the School of Medicine.

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Singer Sargent Catalogue Raisonné Project; Carolyn Peter and Claudine Dixon of the Armand Hammer Museum in Los Angeles; Christian Huemer, PhD candidate in Art History in Paris; Edgar Munhall, curator emeritus of The Frick Collection, New York; Professor Laurence Senelick, Bernhardt expert and professor of drama at Harvard University; Professor Carol Ockman, professor of art at Williams College; Professor Elizabeth Chalmers Macknight, expert on the Paris salons; Professor Alan Walker, head of the LHS Numismatic Ltd. of Zurich, Switzerland, and an expert on the famed Pozzi coin collection; Professor Willa Silverman, associate professor of French and Jewish studies, Penn State University, an expert on the Dreyfus affair; Dr. Valerie Steele, chief curator of the Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York; Dr. Bruce Winslow; Mr Dan Malan, biographer of Gustave Doré; Mr Wade Major, who assisted with French translation; Mr Harmen Snel of Amsterdam; M. Alain Bugnicourt of Paris; and the Fichole family, also of Paris, descendants of Madame Emma Fischhof.

We also thank Annie Chance for her editorial input and Viveka de Costa for her help with the preparation of the manuscript.

Dramatis personae

Introducing some of the people referred to briefly in our book who were friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and/or lovers of Sarah Bernhardt and Samuel Pozzi.

Bourget, Paul—novelist, critic, and poet; friend of Pozzi's

Bulteau, Augustine—journalist who wrote for the newspaper *Figaro* under the pen name of Foemina, mostly columns about music and the arts and social commentary. Divorced and with no children, she was hostess of a small and very intellectual salon which Pozzi frequented from 1899; with her close friend the Countess de la Baume, she acquired a house in Venice often visited by Pozzi. Nicknamed Toche, she had a close friendship with Pozzi that included a vast correspondence.

Cazalis, Henri—poet and physician, close friend of Pozzi's

Clemenceau, Georges—medical doctor, journalist, and politician who was prime minister of France during World War I; active supporter of the Dreyfusard cause; a friend of Pozzi's from their years in medical school onward

Dastre, Albert—Paris physician who pioneered anesthetic techniques; often anesthetized Pozzi's surgical patients

De Chilly, Charles—director of the Odéon Theater at the time Bernhardt played there

De Girardin, Émile—journalist and politician, strong advocate of freedom of the press, founded and wrote for several newspapers and published memoirs and novels

De Kératry, Émile—politician, soldier, and author of several historical works; supported the Franco-Prussian War of 1870; left Paris by balloon during the siege to join Gambetta and attempted unsuccessfully to raise troops in Brittany to fight the Prussians

Doyen, Eugène—Paris surgeon who established a large private clinic in which he performed both general and gynecological surgery. Responsible for several technical improvements and instruments still in use. A contemporary of Pozzi's but professionally and ideologically often opposed to him.

Duquesnel, Félix—Associate director of the Odéon Theater at the time Bernhardt played there, he recognized her unique talent very early on in her career.

Faure, Felix—French politician, President of France from 1895 until his death in 1899 (which infamously occurred while he was engaging in sex in his office with a much younger woman). He was opposed to the retrial of Dreyfus in 1899; his death and the subsequent election of Dreyfusard Émile Loubet as president helped bring about the release of Dreyfus later that year.

France, Anatole—novelist and poet, winner of Nobel Prize for Literature in 1921; strong supporter of Captain Dreyfus; friend of Pozzi's; dedicated a short story, *The Red Egg*, to Pozzi.

Gautier, Judith—daughter of Théophile Gautier, she was an Oriental scholar, poet, and novelist and is credited with acting as muse to composer Richard Wagner. Close friend of Pozzi; possibly had an affair with him in the late 1870s.

Gautier, Théophile—poet, novelist, and highly regarded critic of literature, art, and the theater.

Halévy, Fromental—composer, father of Geneviève Halévy (later Geneviève Bizet and then Straus)

Hervieu, Paul—playwright, novelist, and member of the French Academy; a close friend of Pozzi's

Jayle, Felix—physician, intern at the Broca, assistant to Dr. Thierry de Martel at the surgery that failed to save Pozzi's life

Lavallière, Eve—actress, contemporary of Bernhardt's, who achieved great success in Paris but later abandoned her career to become a devout Catholic and recluse

Leconte de Lisle, Charles—poet of the Parnassian movement who translated Homer, Euripides, Sophocles, and Aeschylus among others but also wrote much original verse in the classical French mode. A longtime friend of Pozzi's, he bequeathed his literary work to him on his death in 1894.

Pinard, Adolphe—obstetrician and colleague of Pozzi's who cared for Thérèse during her pregnancies. His name was given to the small horn used for many decades by doctors to listen to the fetal heart in the womb.

Proust, Adrien—physician; father of Marcel and Robert

Proust, Robert—physician; for ten years, assistant to Samuel Pozzi at the Broca Hospital

Reinach, Joseph—lawyer, journalist, and politician; a defender of Dreyfus from the time of the first trial; strong advocate of a free press; author of a seven-volume history of the Dreyfus affair

Réjane—stage name of Gabrielle-Charlotte Réju, French actress who was a friend of Bernhardt's and whose greatest success was in comedy and light soubrette roles. Both she and Bernhardt served as models for the character of the actress la Berma in Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*.

Rénaut, Joseph—physician, professor of internal medicine in Paris, known to Pozzi since their intern years together

Robin, Albert—physician with fashionable practice in Paris; close friend of Pozzi's since medical school

Sardou, Victorien—playwright, author of major works designed for Bernhardt in title role including *Fédora*, *Théodora*, and *La Tosca*

Schwob, Marcel—Highly regarded writer of short stories, translator of Robert Louis Stevenson and Oscar Wilde, authority on philology and Oriental languages. Schwob suffered from a chronic intestinal complaint for which Pozzi performed surgery on several occasions.

Sedlmeyer, Charles—Parisian art dealer and father of Pozzi's longtime love Emma Fischhof

Sévérine—pen name of Caroline Rémy; journalist, socialist, and political activist in the cause of women's rights and of Dreyfus. First met Pozzi as a patient, later became a friend and co-Dreyfusard.

Trélat, Ulysse—French surgeon, friend, and colleague of Pozzi; volunteered for war of 1870; an early convert to Listerism

Verneuil, Aristide—French surgeon, head of service at Lariboisière hospital, more conservative than Pozzi in his approach to surgical practice. Both Trélat and Verneuil displayed considerable courage in defending their hospitals and patients during the Paris Commune.



Mon cher Sam
 mon cher ami
 je suis votre
 dévoué à jamais
 je suis très pressé
 la folie. Préparez
 à me que ce soit
 par moi tout cela

Enfin à bon he
 te verrai. Il n'y
 a rien de plus facile
 à dire et rien de plus
 difficile à faire. Je
 vous envoie mes
 sentiments et vous
 prie de leur croire
 tout ce qu'il faut
 pour être bien
 aimé
 Sarah Bernhardt

Mon cher Sam
 je suis votre
 dévoué à jamais
 Sarah Bernhardt

Letter from Sarah Bernhardt to Samuel Pozzi, January 1878.
Translation on page 21.