**ESSAY-RECLAIMING DOCTOR POZZI**

**What are the origins of the libellous and baseless allegations made about Samuel Pozzi since the late 20th century?**

The enormous contribution Samuel Pozzi made to improvements in reproductive health care for women are noted elsewhere on this website. In his own lifetime he was referred to as ‘the father of French gynaecology,’ a plaudit for his work. In the 21st century, gynaecology having a ‘father’ is a much less appropriate term, but Pozzi’s contribution remains very important. He was enormously influential in spreading information about the need for antisepsis and asepsis in the practice of medicine and particularly in surgery. He helped develop the scientific basis and the techniques of gynaecological surgery as a cure or remedy for numerous conditions in women, in particular ovarian cysts, fibroids of the uterus and cancers of the cervix, uterus and ovaries. He taught several generations of young doctors and supplied a magnificent textbook that was in print until the 1930s. He treated poor women in the public hospitals of Paris as well as wealthy ones who attended his consulting rooms and who were operated upon in their own homes, as was standard in the late 19th century when private hospitals with operating suites did not yet exist.

There’s no doubt that Pozzi was extremely goodlooking, as testified by photographs taken from his boyhood onwards and shown on this website; he was also compassionate, amusing and charismatic. He had a great interest in art and history; he was well and widely read, spoke fluent English and German (he translated Darwin into French), and was a discerning collector of art and antiquities, especially coins. Through family connections, he was initially invited into the most interesting and lively salons in the Paris of his time, and he continued to frequent these throughout his life. He mixed socially with writers, artists, actors, novelists, politicians and others. He married a wealthy heiress, Thérèse Loth-Cazalis, and the couple for many years held their own dinners, soirees and lunches, despite the marriage, which produced three children, ultimately breaking down.

In 1881 Pozzi had his portrait, *Dr Pozzi At Home*, painted by the expatriate American John Singer Sargent, who was at that time 24 years old and just becoming known in Paris. Pozzi met Sargent through the artist and art teacher Carolus-Duran; they were both members of the same gentlemen’s club, the very lively Mirlitons. The striking portrait- shows Pozzi very definitely ‘at home’ - in a scarlet dressing gown and frilled white dress shirt. This was how he appeared to Sargent one morning when the painter arrived early for a sitting. The portrait was never shown in France and remained in family hands until 1967, when it was bought by American oil magnate and art lover Armand Hammer. On Hammer’s death in 1990, the portrait became part of the Hammer Museum collection in Los Angeles and was seen by the wider public for the first time.

Having served as a medic in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, Pozzi re-enlisted in 1914, and became a military surgeon for a second time, but he died in 1918, murdered in his consulting rooms by a deranged patient. Up until the 1990s, he was known to French gynaecologists and historians largely as a major contributor to women’s health. Since around 1990, however, there has developed an extraordinary and prurient campaign against Pozzi’s reputation, mainly in the (mostly English-speaking) art world, with no basis on what is known of his life, and largely dependent on aspects of the Sargent portrait.

Sargent also was the painter of Madame Amélie Gautreau, wife of a Parisian banker, a young woman notable in Parisian society for her extravagant dress and exaggerated makeup rather than her sparkling conversation. This Sargent portrait was exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1884; it caused a major scandal because Sargent had painted the strap of Gautreau’s dress falling down her right arm. At the time, the Gautreau and Pozzi families did not know each other although they subsequently became acquainted, and around 1886 Pozzi performed surgery to remove a large ovarian cyst, probably a dermoid cyst. Letters from Madame Gautreau to Pozzi and his wife, and between Pozzi and others, support a polite social relationship between the families, and a professional relationship when Pozzi treated both Madame Gautreau and her daughter Louise.\*

The two portraits, *Dr Pozzi* and ‘*Madame X’*, are the best known of all Sargent’s French work and both will be displayed at a major exhibition in 2025-26, firstly at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and subsequently at the Musée d’Orsay in Paris.

It is worthwhile considering in detail the history of the slurs cast upon Pozzi’s reputation, speculative gossip that has fuelled what is almost a Pozzi industry in salacious tittle-tattle and rumours in the art world – specifically in American and English publications.

Pozzi met Sarah Bernhardt as a young medical student in 1869 (see the Home page of this website. It is well-documented that the two had a relationship intermittently throughout the 1870s and then a close friendship for the rest of Pozzi’s life (as described in our book, The Diva and Doctor God, based on the more than 100 letters from Sarah to Sam). Also well documented, in the years before Pozzi’s marriage in 1879, are friendships and possible affairs with other women prominent in intellectual circles in Paris, including poet and novelist Judith Gautier, salonnière and widow of Bizet Madame Genevieve Straus, actress Réjane and Madame Emma Fischhof, who shared his passion for the arts and with whom he had a long relationship from the early 1890s until 1918. But as novelist Julian Barnes, who has conducted extensive research into Pozzi’s life and times, wrote in 2019:

‘…there was, for almost his entire life, very little scandal attached to Pozzi’s name... there is not a single recorded note of female complaint against him. Pozzi makes it into the diaries and letters of the time, as a surgeon, society figure and collector…(but) never emerges from documents of the time as the kind of ruthless libertine – indeed “sex addict”- into which he is being transformed by a twenty-first century coarsening of language and memory.’

More than thirty years after Sargent’s death, in 1957, in a poorly-researched biography of Sargent, artist and purveyor of stolen documents Charles Merrill Mount postulated an affair between Pozzi and Madame Gautreau, citing no evidence whatsoever, but nevertheless linking the subjects of the two striking portraits. Mount suggests an affair between Pozzi and Gautreau prior to 1882, as this was the year in which Sargent first mentioned, in a letter to Ben Del Castillo, that he would like to paint Madame Gautreau’s portrait. (Del Castillo was a friend of Sargent’s and a relative of Gautreau’s.) Mount then assumes that Sargent may have asked Pozzi to recommend him to Amelie Gautreau, but there are no letters no notes, no mention of this ever happening. In fact, it is clear from the letters held by Nicolas Bourdet that the Pozzi and Gautreau families did not meet until 1884. However Mount’s speculation was taken up by Sargent biographer Stanley Olson, who used Mount as his source in his 1986 work*, John Singer Sargent, the Portrait.* Olson found no proof beyond conjecture; unfortunately for Pozzi’s reputation, others seized on this notion and presented it as fact.

In *Time* magazine of March 29th 1999, in Art- a true visual sensualist, Robert Hughes wrongly states that both *Doctor Pozzi at Home* and *Madame X* were shown together at the Paris Salon of 1884; in fact the Pozzi portrait has never been shown publicly in France since it was painted in 1881. Hughes further states, again with no evidence that Pozzi was ‘a society gynaecologist believed to be her (Madame X’s) lover’. However, following these false claims art curators have frequently shown the two portraits side-by-side, thereby perpetuating this falsehood.

Then we have the Madame X ballet of Patrick Soluri, 1999: ‘A proud young society woman, Amélie Gautreau, embarks on a love affair with the infamous philanderer, Dr Samuel Pozzi. Rumors of their liaison become the talk of Belle Époque Paris, especially after Sargent debuts his lewd portrait of Amélie, both immortalizing the scandal and setting the sharp tongues of the society ladies into a frenzy.’ This is absolute nonsense. Gautreau’s portrait is not lewd; as prominent art curator and writer Trevor Fairbrother states in that same year, 1999, it is ‘stark and elegant.’ Unfortunately however, Madame X as ballet was well received by a public who had no knowledge of Pozzi’s life, and it has been revived at least twice since.

Another ballet, *Strapless*, similarly denigrates Pozzi. Its creator, Christopher Wheeldon, wrote in 2016: ‘At the time (the portrait was painted) she (Gautreau) was having an affair with Samuel, a handsome celebrated doctor. They were the It Kids of late 19th century Paris.’ In fact, Amélie Gautreau seems from contemporary accounts to have been a vapid and uninteresting woman, concerned only with her appearance. She was barely literate; Pozzi apparently lent her some books, possibly to encourage her reading. Some months later she wrote, in a childish hand and without punctuation ‘I have not forgotten that I have some of your books excuse me for keeping them I read so slowly.’\*\* This letter is in the Bourdet collection.

There is also much fiction and fabrication around Gautreau in Debra Davis’s 2004 book, *Strapless*. The implications of her striking profile, her exquisite figure, her flawless skin covered with lavender powder, her low-cut dress, are that she attracted ‘strings of lovers’ but Davis struggles to identify even one. She suggests that Gautreau may have had affairs with Ferdinand de Lesseps and Léon Gambetta. De Lesseps was 75 years old in 1880, and happily married to his (relatively younger) second wife; Amélie Gautreau was just 21 years old. Gambetta is described by Davis as “a political force in Paris in the 1880s” and she speculates that Gautreau may have been the “Madame X” referred to by French newspapers as Gambetta’s secret mistress. However, the “secret mistress” is well known to have been Léonie Léon, with whom he had a close relationship from 1872 and intended to marry; furthermore his cabinet lost power in January 1882, whereupon he retired to the country with Léonie and died there in December of that year. The years of his political power were the 1870s. Both de Lesseps and Gambetta were friends of the Gautreau family but there is nothing to support allegations of a sexual liaison between Amélie Gautreau and either of these men, and their social and personal situations would seem to argue against any such relationship. Amélie’s mother’s very close interest in her daughter’s life would seem to be a further argument against “a string of affairs.”

Davis claims in *Strapless*, with no evidence for her allegation, that Pozzi and Gautreau were ‘at the height of their affair’ when Sargent was painting Pozzi, but it is clear from what evidence does exist in the Bourdet letters that the two had never met at that stage.

There’s more, lots more, on both Samuel and Amélie, as the 21st century rolls on, the two portraits are shown more widely, and more and more speculation and downright libel is written about them. Just two more examples:

In 2024, in *New Lines Magazine*, journalist Diane de Vignemont describes her personal encounters with what is called in French ‘*la pince de Pozzi’* – a tenaculum. This was originally the medical instrument (*pince-érigne, pince tire-balle américaine*) used for extracting shrapnel from bullet wounds. Pozzi – who saw its use in the war of 1870 but who never claimed to have invented it, nor did he give it his name – explained its use for grasping and stabilising the cervix during minor and major surgery carried out via the vagina, from uterine curettage to vaginal hysterectomy. de Vignemont experienced use of the tenaculum during insertion of an intrauterine device, IUD, when it was used without local anaesthesia, causing her much physical distress. In her article she blames Pozzi for ‘135 years of women’s pain.’

But Pozzi never envisaged the use of the tenaculum without anaesthesia. It’s important to understand that gynaecological practice in Pozzi’s time was very different from practice today. There was no ‘office gynaecology’ – no well-woman checks, Pap smears, pipelles, colposcopy, hysteroscopy, no IUD insertion. Consultations for gynaecological complaints included physical examination, but there was no need for a tenaculum because if examination of the uterine cavity was needed, or more major surgery, the patient would be given a general anaesthetic. For removal of a cervical polyp, or biopsy of suspected cervical cancer, Pozzi recommended local anaesthetic in the form of cocaine. This is clearly detailed in his textbook, the *Treatise of Gynaecology*, pp113-115 when Pozzi discusses how to either stabilise the cervix (for example to perform curettage) or actually bring it lower towards the introitus (for example for cervical amputation).

de Vignemont quotes Pozzi stating that there are only two tiny ‘stings’ (piqures) with tenaculum but this is taken out of context: he is not referring to what a patient might feel, because the anaesthetised patient will feel nothing. A better translation would be ‘pinpricks’ – Pozzi is saying that damage *to the cervix* from the instrument is minimal,

The problem is not with the instrument, it’s that generations of gynaecologists (in Europe at least) have come to use the instrument without local anaesthetic (LA) for office procedures. I strongly recommend the use of LA via spray, or infiltration with a very fine needle, at the site where the tenaculum will be applied, prior to the procedure and this has always been my own practice.

Later in 2024, in *The New Yorker*, appeared more denigration of Pozzi. Art critic Jackson Arn, writing about the work of John Singer Sargent, accuses Pozzi of ‘manually’ examining his patients, the implication being that this was an unnecessary part of medical practice and done simply for Pozzi’s own sexual gratification. This is nonsense. As gynaecologists, we all ‘manually’ examine our patients, initially to reach an accurate diagnosis and subsequently to perform surgery and other procedures. In 2024 we have ultrasound, Xrays, CT scanning and MRI to assist us (Pozzi had none of these) but physical examination is the bedrock of all medical practice including gynaecology. Pozzi, and others of his era, developed the systematic examination of the pelvic organs of women that is used to this day; he describes this meticulously in his *Treatise*, pages 98-104 and for many years taught it to medical students and junior doctors. It is completely professional practice.

Arn also describes Pozzi as a ‘playboy’, a crude and completely unjustified characterisation of the man, while de Vignemont calls him ’a friend and lover of the famous who invariably (sic) seduced his patients with nimble fingers as suited for surgery as they were for the boudoir’ and says that ‘he certainly slept with many of his patients.’ No evidence is proffered for any of these allegations.

It's easy to slander and defame a man dead for more than a hundred years; he cannot sue, as any 21st century gynaecologist would do. In gynaecological practice we all touch and manoeuvre the female genital organs of scores of patients every working day, just as orthopaedic surgeons touch bones and joints and ophthalmologists examine eyes. The idea of ‘invariably seducing’ dozens of women every day as well as providing necessary medical care is, in addition to libellous, exhausting.

It is time to counteract this baseless foolery and restore Pozzi’s reputation as a serious and gifted surgeon and gynaecologist who contributed enormously to the health and wellbeing of women in his own time and helped establish the principles and practice of the care of women still in use today.

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\*These dates for the meeting of the Pozzi and Gautreau families and the surgery for Madame Gautreau are based on letters held in the Paris archives of Nicolas Bourdet, great grandson of Samuel Pozzi.

\*\* A detailed discussion of the evidence in the Bourdet correspondence of the social relationships between the Pozzi and Gautreau families and between Amélie and Pozzi can be found in The Diva and Doctor God, pages 161-178.