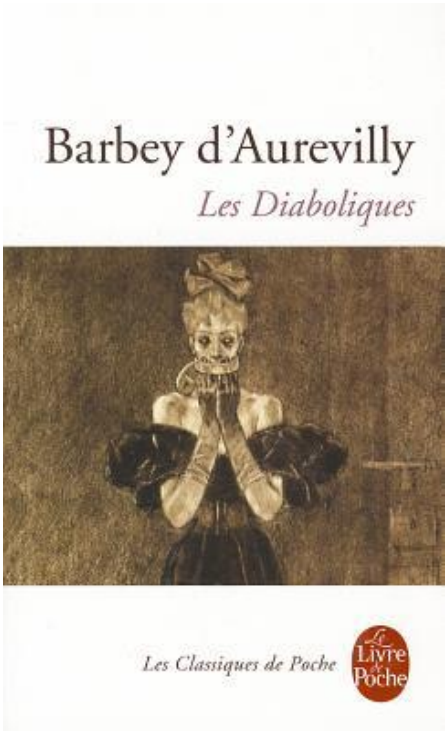

Les Diaboliques

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Quant aux femmes de ces histoires, pourquoi ne seraient-elles pas les Diaboliques ? N'ont-elles pas assez de diabolisme en leur personne pour mériter ce doux nom ? Diaboliques ! il n'y en a pas une seule ici qui ne le soit à quelque degré. Comme le Diable, qui était un ange aussi, mais qui a culbuté, la tête en bas, le... reste en haut ! Pas une ici qui ne soit pure, vertueuse, innocente. Monstres même à part, elles présentent un effectif de bons sentiments et de moralité bien peu considérable. Elles pourraient donc s'appeler aussi « les Diaboliques », sans l'avoir volé... On a voulu faire un petit musée de ces dames. L'art a deux lobes, comme le cerveau. La nature ressemble à ces femmes qui ont un oeil bleu et un oeil noir. Voici l'oeil noir dessiné à l'encre - à l'encre de la petite vertu.
Barbey d'Aurevilly.

Les Diaboliques Details

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From Reader Review Les Diaboliques for online ebook

Mary says

Dans l'ensemble un très bon recueil mais des histoires d'intérêt inégal, en ce qui me concerne..
En fait j'ai préféré les trois premières tandis que les trois dernières ne m'ont pas absolument passionnée. Mais j'ai adoré le style de l'auteur, très pointu, très fin et très drôle, en fait.
Mon histoire préférée est **Le Rideau Cramoisi**, car pour moi c'est la plus concrète et la plus glauque, celle dans lequel le mot "diabolique" prend tout son sens.

Quiver says

> Perhaps I am mistaken, but it seems to me that if you saw Hell through a small window, it would be far more horrific than if you were able to see the place in its entirety.

Thematically, all six short stories all contain a she-devil, a he-dandy, and a strong moral message delivered amidst shockingly gruesome circumstances. Barbey saw such stories as being in keeping with his Catholic faith. Indeed, according to him, Catholicism was unshockable and ultimately accepting of audacious art from which it could draw lessons. (Towards the end of his life, he passed this opinion to his protégé Léon Bloy.)

No matter how much Barbey maintains the open-mindedness of Catholicism, he allows himself no cheap thrill, but rather constructs a sophisticated, white-gloved presentation of hell’s disciples. He insulates the readers from each abhorrent moral crime, so that they may mull over the disgusting consequences at their leisure. (If you sense a dandy approach here, you’re not mistaken.)

Insulation is achieved by distancing.

First, the plots of the stories are pushed into the past. Barbey relies heavily on historical facts and accurate depictions of society, dress, culture, and conventions to set the scene. Across this backdrop, he then draws frame within narratorial frame—each bringing with it the niggling question of veracity—until the ultimately nested narrator reveals the punchline. The story doesn’t end there, but instead goes on massaging the point by displaying the dismay of those present in the top frame or by deducing the moral. Only then is the insulation complete.

If you accept the frames as an artificial tactic, the situation is almost whimsical, a paper theatre on the stage of a paper theatre on the stage of another.

If you accept the frames as immersion then they’re iconic of Barbey’s message: we’re led through the grand portcullis of the castle, through the great inner gate, through the large hall door, through the side door leading down, through the narrow dungeon entrance, where we’re allowed to peer through a slit—at Sin itself.

A sinister journey for a glimpse of the forbidden.

With good reason: any less sinister the journey, any larger the slit, and we might not be as affected by what we see. We might even be tempted.

(Seen from afar, all at once, Dante’s Hell is an ice cream cone.)

Simona Friuli says

Adorabile decadentismo "da soffitta": un giocattolo abbandonato e ormai frusto - un relitto - che, pure, ha un suo modo rétro di fare sensazione. Se l'autore adoperava "costumi sfacciatamente all'antica e fatti per dare nell'occhio", tale è la sua posizione letteraria che attinge a tutte le suggestioni romantiche di derivazione Secentesca, addensandole al gusto prettamente più decadente per la donna diabolica che muta il sesso debole in sesso forte. Un'orda sensazionale - delitti, veleni, cuori imbalsamati - in cui Barbey tiene l'occhio fisso al peccato, inteso come "trasgressione alla legge divina" in cui credeva, con malcelata fascinazione.

Jim says

Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly has written a strange, but beautifully composed set of decadent short stories. The unifying theme is a set of heroines who are intent on vengeance, crime, or violence. In most of the six stories, there is a framing story, usually involving aging roués recalling their youths over coffee, brandy, and cigars. Typical are the old soldiers in "At a Dinner of Atheists," in which the conversation turns to women:

> All took part in this abuse of women, even the oldest, the toughest, and those most disgusted with females, as they cynically called women -- for a man may give up sex love but he will retain his self-love in talking about women; and though on the edge of the grave, men are always ready to root with their snouts in the garbage of self-conceit.

Even when the company is mixed, as in "The Crimson Curtain," the ambiance is masculine, upper-class, and deeply cynical.

Les Diaboliques: reminds me of such works as Joris Karl Huysmans, author of Against Nature and other decadent tales redolent with the pessimism that followed in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War and the Commune. (And yet, this was the same period that gave rise to Marcel Proust and his monumental Remembrance of Things Past Volume 1-3 Box Set.)

Although **Les Diaboliques** is about women, I do not think women would like it, as the viewpoint is so exclusively masculine. Still, I liked it enough to consider seeking out other of his works which may have been rendered into English.

Beluosus says

Ce serait un grand livre si l'auteur vraiment avait aimé les femmes. Sa misogynie implicite le gâte.

Il faut savourer la diablerie de telles femmes magnifiques, célébrer leurs scélératesses plutôt que moraliser contre elles par sous-entendu.

Hauteclaire, la belle escrimeuse qui porte le nom de l'épée d'Olivier, pourrait être une des personnages les plus grandes de littérature -- si seulement elle a été écrit par un type moins salaud.

J.M. Hushour says

This is another of those works, notable for its now dated, obsolescent notorious-ness, but one that stands on its own merits. Les Dia (not to be mistaken for Les Diarrheaux, Eng. "The Diarrhea-tistes" by Comte En Briches) was, in its time, considered to be a work of great obscenity (it's not) and is now mistakenly considered some spine-tingling work of gothic fright (it's not). Maybe they're getting it confused with LeFanu?
Interestingly, the collection can be considered offensive by our modern sensibilities since all the "diabolical ones" are women. What it might be easy to forget (though I can't see how) is that these, all stories of weird love, involve men, too, and the occasional daughter, and it might be better to point up how shittily both sexes can be. But Les Dia makes it clear that women are somehow tools of Satan, or fillable with satanic urges and lusts. What goes unsaid and might be the point is that it is the pointed, acute, stifling world of men that make it so. So maybe men are Satan.
Arguments like this are stupid; I'm backing away now
The collection is enjoyable, and there are little frightful things, not supernatural at all, but horrifying in their frank immediacy (dead babies) or in their delineation of the terrifying limits people can go to for revenge (poison; noble lady prostituting herself as a cheap whore to get revenge on her jealous husband). Actually, the latter parenthetical smugness, "A Woman's Revenge" makes the whole volume worth reading.
Les Dia influenced Proust, too!

Kai Weber says

There's a lot of black romanticism in here, going all the way to bloody horror in the last story, but Barbey d'Aurevilly's style is not interested in creating tension, but more in describing states. That's the dandy background, probably. While those stories have one supernatural foot in the earlier romantic literature, the dandyism foot is standing in the mid-19th century society. And then, yes, he's a three-footed beast, there's the bluntness and horror casting a shadow on the modern times to come. Is he the link between E.T.A. Hoffmann and Stefan Zweig with a seasoning of Marquis de Sade?

Bill Kerwin says

"'Keep in the ranks, Ranconnet,' said Mesnilgrand, as though he had been commanding his squadron, 'and hold your tongue. Are you always going to be as hot-headed and impatient as you are before the enemy? Let me make my story manoeuvre as I like.'"

Thus Napoleon's old commander upbraids a former officer who presumes to suggest that he get to the point of his narrative in "A Dinner of Atheists," one of the six stories included in Barbey d'Aurvevilly's "Les Diaboliques."

It is good advice for any reader of this book of tales. These stories are each above 15,000 words in length--close to the length of a short novella, twice the length of the average long short story--and each tells a tale of female sexuality and evil that is memorable, extremely daring for its time, and still packs a considerable punch. Still, I imagine many readers will occasionally be frustrated--as I initially was--both by the wealth of detailed observation of each social milieu and also by the extraordinary length of each of the framing narratives--often as long as the tales themselves.

Soon, though, I learned to "keep to the ranks," and accept the fact that my general Barbey d'Aurevilly was in charge of maneuvers. As soon as I did so, I found that the portraits in the frame stories themselves--superannuated dandies, elegant roues, provincial monarchist nobles, free-thinking followers of the Emperor in exile--are not only just as interesting as the tales of female perfidy themselves, but often hold the key to the male-dominated world that calls forth this "diabolic" behavior in woman.

Somewhat eccentric, but a unique and influential book. Not to be missed by anyone interested in the literature of decadence.

Czarny Pies says

Cette collection de six contes publiée en 1874 est le plus réussi des ouvrages de Jules Barbery d'Aurevilly. Chaque nouvelle raconte l'histoire d'une femme diabolique qui commet une crime. Il faut dire que les femmes sont belles, séduisantes et bien habillées. Elles vient toutes des milieux aisées.

Les Diaboliques va plaire a tous ceux qui aime le style decadent de la France de la fin du siècle. Ce n'est pas un genre qui m'emballe beaucoup mais les exemples dans ce receuil sont tous très bien faits.

Jim Rayder says

I found a 1961 edition translated as "The She Devils", wonder what it's going under these days. Barbey (that's real surname--he tacked on the rest to fake nobility) is an odd writer who essentially writes trash with great panache. I read only four of the six stories; the book descends as it goes along, is very overwritten, though rich in description, proto-black humor and capturing characters' vocal inflections. Although flawed, it is unique, however ultimately minor.
Barbey is a sort of Nerval Without A Cause, one might say, and Gautier wrote somewhat similar tales much better (collected here as "My Fantoms"). But if your enamored of French weirdness of this period, you'll get a buzz out of "She Devils".

J. says

> *It may be that creatures of that sort love deception for deception's sake, as others love art for art's sake, or as the Poles love battles.*

Ladies.
First and foremost, d'Aurevilly is concerned, enchanted, and perhaps obsessed by les dames du salon, and the

more clever and deceptive, the better appreciated. He will concede that his Royalist, Catholic codes are double-edged, double-sided, even, and can be reversed for interesting effect. And he knows that (for 1820) the gallant gentleman's heroic domain is still the field of battle, whilst for les femmes it is, as ever, the drawing room.

The tales of *Les Diaboliques* are themselves deceptive, though, and shouldn't be anticipated as revelling in decadence and the dark side. Rather, the author seems to be mining a hidden seam of pre-revolutionary morality tale, stories that are, with careful framing by d'Aurevilly, mounted in circumstances that only appear to imply that potential for decadence. In the end, the author is voluntarily, unapologetically still held in the sway of the ancien régime, and ready to counter very adult complexity with very humane outcome. These are romances, but play out tauntingly, as if directed by theater-of-cruelty practitioners.

...there isn't one among us who hasn't witnessed some of those mysterious workings of feeling or passion which ruin a whole career, some of those heartbreaks which give out only a muffled sound, like that of a body falling into the hidden abyss of an oubliette, and over which the world spreads its myriad voices or its silence... I myself, in my childhood, saw--no, saw isn't the right word--I guessed, I sensed one of those cruel, terrible dramas which are not staged in public, although the public sees the actors in them every day: one of those sanguinary comedies*, as Pascal called them, but presented in secret, behind the curtain of private life... what you don't know multiplies a hundredfold the impression made by what you know...*

Arranged sometimes like jewels around a perfumed neckline, but more often candle-lit around a grand dinner table, the ladies are the preoccupation, but there are also dandies, libertines, rakes, and warlords. Duchesses here may become whores in the course of the proceedings, true loves may become ghosts, and atheists may burn with the inner flame of the martyrs. M d'Aurevilly prepares the ground like a medieval siege, layering exposition and revelation in carefully patient steps, extreme at times. But when he throws the switch and lets his drama unfold, he soars. Like some gothic seer who has most certainly got a message to send, for d'Aurevilly it is a given that pride, loss, shame, sin, and guilt really never go away.

But there is something else. There is here, in Paris after midnight or in the windswept environs of provincial Cotentin, the flavor of the long-ago, the frisson of someone-else's world, not ours... though somehow familiar. It is the receding coastline of the Age Of Faith. Beneath his well composed equilibrium, the author can't escape the vexing sense that the Age Of Reason, newly arrived, has thrown some gorgeous white magic to the winds, a never-again state of grace now lost ...

Night was beginning to fall in the streets of ----, but in the church of that picturesque little town in Western France it was already dark. Night is almost always in advance in churches. It falls earlier there than anywhere else,, either on account of the stained-glass windows, when there are stained-glass windows, or on account of the number of pillars, so often compared with the trees in a forest, and the shadows cast by the arches. But scarcely anywhere are the doors closed because this night of the churches has slightly anticipated the death of the day outside. They generally remain open after the Angelus has rung--sometimes till a very late hour, as on the eve of the great feast-days in pious towns, where great numbers of people go to confession in preparation for communion the next day.
Never, at any hour of the day, are churches in the provinces more frequented by churchgoers than at that twilight hour when work comes to an end, daylight fades, and the Christian soul prepares for the night--night which resembles death, and during which death may come. At that hour it is borne in on one that the Christian religion was born in the catacombs and that it still retains something of the melancholy of its cradle...

It isn't hard to see how this author is something of a forerunner to Mallarmé, to Baudelaire. While

d'Aurevilly is an equal opportunity reporter, and will hurl a few anti-clericalisms with the best of them, at heart he longs, at one with his romantic sensibilities, for the days of a more profound certainty, a prior understanding.

Lovely book, probably best to buy it and savor each of these near-novella tales individually, rather than as a string of stories; they're similar but each has a unique quality. The last, called *A Woman's Vengeance*, is nothing short of devastating.

Megan says

This book was much more enjoyable than I originally anticipated. It has confirmed my very particular proclivity for 19th century erudite French smut.

D'Aurevilly is a master storyteller, and the melodrama with which he conveys these stories is superb. I don't usually require a strong storyline to keep my interest engaged in a work, so it was a welcome surprise to be so engaged by it here.

This oft-overlooked collection should be more visible than it currently is within the realm of left of field French literature. Highly recommended.

Glenn Russell says

Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly (1808 – 1889), romantic with the sensibility of a decadent , self-styled dandy, teller of risqué novels and short stories, shocked readers and infuriated the authorities with the publication of *Les Diaboliques*. But there is much more to this captivating novel with its sumptuous, elegant language, well-crafted metaphors and highly visual and sensual imagery than simply shock value. Below are a number of themes common to the six separate tales comprising this novel:

Story within a story
For example, in *The Crimson Curtain*, the first-person narrator tells us as readers how one evening years ago while returning from a hunting trip he shared a carriage with a rotund, old dandy he calls Vicomte de Brassard. The carriage made a stop in a small provincial town for repair. Gazing up at an upper-story window of one of the town's large buildings, a crimson curtain caught the narrator's attention; he points out the captivating tint of the curtain to his riding companion. Ah, such are the twists of fate, since, as it turns out, that exact room with the crimson curtain was a dramatic marker for de Brassard's life -- it all happened back in the day when he was but a seventeen-year-old sublieutenant. And dandy de Brassard tells the tale.

Storytelling with a hook
There's a point, usually about half way through, when something unexpected happens to propel the story into overdrive. And what variety of event are we alluding to here? Why, of course, as if lighting a fuse to a stick of dynamite, a woman ignites a man's passion: BOOM! Now we're reading a Barbey-d'Aurevilly-style spellbinding page-turner.

Dandyism

For Barbey d'Aurevilly, a dandy is not only a man scrupulously devoted to style, neatness and fashion but, as he describes Vicomte de Brassard, a dandy has a seductive beauty which seduce not only woman but circumstances themselves; has a careless disdain and repugnance of discipline; keeps several mistresses at the same time like seven strings of his lyre; drinks like a Pole; jests about his own immorality; belongs to his own times and transcends his times; and, lastly, above all else, scorns all emotion as being beneath him.

Conversation as a cultural highpoint

In all six of these Barbey d'Aurevilly tales, the characters raise conversation to an art form – probing inquiry; genteel exchange; elaborate, detailed storytelling with all the necessary color and nuance to convey a vivid, sensual picture; and, above all, a deep respect for the speaker, permitting one's interlocutor time and space – none of those spurious interruptions commonplace in our current world: cutting a speaker off mid-sentence, answering cell-phones, texting, checking emails, looking at one's watch (the ultimate insult). Indeed, engaging in conversation as a cultivated skill, a consummate refinement, similar to playing baroque music or painting in oils.

Woman as the real power player

19th century France: Victorian, bourgeois, patriarchal, or, in other words, a male-centered, conservative, reason-dominated society. But the dirty little secret for the upholders of Victorian patriarchy is our all-too-human life is fueled by passion and emotion, most particularly sexual emotion – sexual attraction, sexual arousal and, of course, erotic love. The power of each of these Barbey d'Aurevilly tales lies in the fact a female instigates or initiates the key action. Talk about turning those Victorian values upside down and shaking! No wonder the authorities hated Barbey d'Aurevilly and banned his 1874 novel – *Les Diaboliques* also gave the French reading public one of its first tastes of what came to be known as the Decadent Movement, with its smashing to bits the connection and linking of virtue/reward, vice/punishment, good morals/happiness and bad morals/unhappiness, as in *Happiness in Crime*, a tale of two adulterers and murderers who live happily ever after.

For a more specific rasa, let's look at one of the tales. In *The Greatest Love of Don Juan*, we read of a Don Juan-like lover, Comte de Ravila, dining with twelve of his previous romantic conquests. Barbey d'Aurevilly describes the physical strength and mature sensuality of these sumptuous lovers: "Full curves and ample proportions, dazzling bosoms, beating in majestic swells above liberally cut bodices . . . " And then he writes of the sheer psychic power of these ladies as the evening progresses: "They felt a new and mysterious power in their innermost being of which, until then, they had never suspected the existence. The joy of this discovery, the sensation of a tripled life force, the physical incitements, so stimulating to highly strung temperaments, the sparkling lights, the penetrating odor of so many flowers swooning in an atmosphere overheated with the emanations of all these lovely bodies, the sting of heady wines, all acted together."

Then, one woman demands our Don Juan tell the story of the greatest love of his life. If effect, he is being asked to choose one of his lovers amongst the present company. Comte de Ravila tells his story but, turns out, the story is not at all what these ladies expected.

My take is Ravila did the exactly the right thing. True, his story was not a tale of wild, heart-stopping, hot-blooded passion – he probably had twelve equally erotic and fantastically romantic stories to tell on that subject, one for each lady present, however his story was of a completely different cast but a story that had, from his perspective, a happy ending – he escaped from the banquet with the real prize: his life.

What an impossible question to ask a man: to choose one woman amongst twelve surrounding him. If he did, he most likely would have been torn to shreds by eleven Dionysian-frenzied former lovers. That's the way to

think on your feet and save your skin, Ravila. Bravo!

Shawn says

Quite a good read. Perhaps a bit stiff for some, but these varied tales of male and female relations must have been shocking at the time and a few still manage to disturb.

D'Aurevilly writes almost exclusively of the defeated, wealthy class of French monarchists, left to languish as society and history passes them by. Most are set either in D'Aurevilly's sometimes-hometown of Valognes or, of course, Paris. Interestingly, they are all told as stories within a story, so the intruiged and shocked reactions of the listeners are included in the tale, perhaps as social commentary or, perhaps, for the reader to judge their personal reaction against.

The stories are as follows (no spoilers involved).

"The Crimson Curtain" - a late-night stopover in a small town incites a lauded military man/notorious rake to tell a tale of his youth and to explain his horror of a particular window and its crimson curtain. It is a story of boredom, the bland couple who gave him barracks as a youth and their young daughter with whom he begins a torrid but necessarily silent affair under the nose of her parents. The story has an almost Poe-like quality as it creates a rarefied mood of passion, silence and obsession.

"The Greatest Love Of Don Juan" - another notorious rake is treated to a celebration by all his female conquests wherein he is questioned as to his greatest love. He tells a bittersweet tale of a past lover and her daughter. To tell you the truth, I found this one entertaining but the ending kind of opaque. Any other readers like to enlighten me (with a spoiler warning, of course). I mean, I *think* I know what the ending implied but I'd like confirmation.

"Happiness In Crime" - a retired doctor tells a tale of his past involving an unthinkable affair between a local nobleman and an expert female fencer, and the monstrous crime they perpetrated.

"Beneath The Cards Of A Game Of Whist" - The appearance of a fascinating foreigner reinvigorates the social lives of a languishing upper class but is there something scandalous going on under the endless whirl of card games?

"At A Dinner Of Atheists" - a gathering of sybaritic blasphemers demand to know why one of their number was seen entering a church and his story reveals a tale of cuckoldry that ends in shocking sexual violence.

"A Women's Revenge" - a young dandy follows a prostitute home only to realize he recognizes her as a missing noblewoman. She regales him with the story of a passionless marriage, a brazen affair, a shocking murder and her ultimate, extended revenge.

If any of those sound interesting, seek ye out this book!

Zeynep Nur says

Öncelikle kitab? bitiremedim, ancak yar?lad?m. Devam?n? okuyaca??m? dü?ünmüyorum çünkü bahsedilen '?eytani' öyküler dönemin tan?nm?? beylerinin çapk?nl?k hikayelerinden ba?ka bir ?ey de?il. ?lk iki hikayeden sonra belki daha farkl? hikayeler de vard?r diye ?ans verip okumaya devam ettim ama birbirini tekrar edip duruyordu öyküler. Zaman kayb? olarak görüyorum maalesef.

Warwick says

> He was no longer thinking about her beauty. He was looking at her as if he wanted to attend her autopsy.
>
> [*Il ne pensait plus à sa beauté. Il la regardait comme s'il avait désiré assister à l'autopsie de son cadavre.*]

I once heard someone explain what 'rococo' meant by saying that it's what happens when the baroque out-baroques itself. Barbey d'Aurevilly is what happens when the Romantic movement out-Romantics itself. These stories are obsessed with the Romanticism of high emotion and the sublime – only here it's all much darker and more 'decadent': *le sublime de l'enfer*, as Barbey calls it at one point.

Each story centres on a woman whose passions prove fatal, for her or for someone else. But although the women are so central to what happens, they are all so remote and unknowable, with utterly mysterious motives – like characters from a folktale. We know them only through the men that endlessly discuss them, lust after them, or hate them. They are – brace yourself as I reach for this adjective – positively *sphingine*, by which I mean cool, beautiful, mysterious and deadly.

> Nothing interior illuminated the outside of this woman. And nothing from the outside had any effect on her interior.
>
> [*Rien du dedans n'éclairait les dehors de cette femme. Rien du dehors ne se répercutait au-dedans!*]

In the first story, 'The Crimson Curtain', the woman around whom the entire plot revolves does not speak even a single line. Although not the most shocking, this tale was in some ways my favourite, and passed the test of a good short story – that it works perfectly as an anecdote. I told it to my wife over a pint in the pub and she had her hand over her mouth with tension. Strangely, it bears an uncanny resemblance to the 'Vincent Vega and Marcellus Wallace's Wife' chapter of *Pulp Fiction*, in that they both concern an illicit liaison that takes a sudden (very similar) U-turn for the worse.

The ending of The Crimson Curtain is very artful, in that almost everything that matters is left unresolved and up in the air. It's an effect I like very much, and which Barbey deploys at several points throughout the book. There is a very modern feeling in *Les Diaboliques* that what is left unsaid is much more exciting than any resolution could ever be – 'what is not known,' the narrator says somewhere, 'multiplies the impression of what is known a hundredfold.'

> ‘Ah!’ said Mlle Sophie de Revistal passionately. ‘It is the same in music as it is in life. What gives expression to both are the silences more than the harmonies.’
>
> [*—Ah ! — dit passionnément Mlle Sophie de Revistal, — il en est également de la musique et de la vie. Ce qui fait l’expression de l’une et de l’autre, ce sont les silence bien plus que les accords.*]

So you end up in this rather oppressive world of suspicion, rumour, and frightful supposition, peopled by these strange sphinxy women and the Byronic protagonists who are fascinated by them.

All but one of the stories are bracketed in direct speech from one of the characters, and with some longish introductions you might be tempted to wonder why the author doesn’t just hurry up and get on with it. But after a while, there emerges a strong sense that having these stories come out ‘in conversation’ is very important to Barbey – *Les Diaboliques* is, among other things, a love letter to the art of sparkling conversation, which Barbey reveres as ‘the last glory of the French spirit’. (The original title for the collection was *Conversational Ricochets*.) So conversation is the primary tool on display here, although ‘At a Dinner of Atheists’ does open on a wonderful descriptive passage about a Valognes church at dusk which makes me wonder what might be on offer in Barbey's other books.

For all that these conversations may seem hopelessly dated to some readers now, there is a real cumulative effect building as you work your way through, and the last couple of stories here pack quite a punch. Impossible to imagine anything like this being published in England in 1874. ‘A Woman’s Vengeance’, the final piece, takes the clichéd 19th-century narrative of the poor innocent girl forced into a life of prostitution (Fantine from *Les Misérables*, for instance – a book which, incidentally, Barbey loathed) and turns it on its head in the most remarkable way. It takes in a surprisingly frank sex scene and includes a moment of almost medieval violence and jealousy.

Barbey was basically a royalist disillusioned by France's endless social revolutions, and he was sceptical about life in a democratic future. Instead of cheap moralising and hookers with hearts of gold, he gives you deep emotional doubt and damaged, incomprehensible strangers. Passion may drive these people to excesses of lust, intrigue and horror – but at their worst, Barbey seems to feel they are also at their most essentially human – beyond society’s conventions, and perhaps even, in some way that we are not, free.

Polen says

I liked this book quite a lot. The stories may not be as diabolique as they might at first seem, but one can feel how shocking and scandalous they would be during their time. It's an easy read for people like me who are more into the stories of people than the stories themselves. D'Aurevilly puts great emphasis on the characters, along with their history, feelings and experiences. The stories are all from a third persons point of view: some from the author's, some from another "narrator".

Includes spoilers from here on

The first story (The Red Curtain) is about a curious house, more specifically, a curious red curtain, behind from which a red vivid light dimly shines at night. The author is in a carriage along with an acquaintance.

And curiously, this man has an exciting story to tell about this house, in front of which, the carriage coincidentally breaks down and stops.

The second story is about the "Don Juan" of another time and another place. This lady killer man reveals the greatest romantic experiance he has ever lived to the curious ladies that surround him.

The third story is about a couple, so in love, that unlike other people would, they can overcome a great guilt in order to continue their romance.

The fourth story (The Mystery behind a Whist Party) takes us through unravelling mysteries and unexpected stories of people who are simply engaged in a whist party. A most dramatic end..

The fifth story is about a soldier who has found, through love, that faith of other people is not something to laugh about, but rather, something to understand in time.

The last story is about the revenge of a woman, whose love affair was ended forever by her husband. She plans a revenge that will last for eternity for the cruel and proud husband she now hates.

Agnes Fontana says

La meilleure entrée en matière pour l'oeuvre du génialissime Barbey d'Aurevilly, un écrin d'une pâte classique qui renferme l'étrange, le fantastique, l'impensable, l'inavoué. Une alliance de feu et de glace qui n'est pas sans rappeler, sous un certain rapport, Léo Perutz. "le bonheur dans le crime" a transporté la jeune escrimeuse que je fus autrefois.

Keith Davis says

Is it possible to admire a book and be disgusted by it at the same time? The stores in this collection by 19th century French author Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly feature wicked amoral women who drive men to adultery, crime, and despair. The stories are all narrated by men, usually relating their story of sin and regret to a younger man. It would be easy to dismiss Barbey d'Aurevilly as a misogynist, but he describes his "she-devils" in such enraptured detail that it is hard to believe he does not secretly admire them. In most cases the women are so wicked that they come across as caricatures, but the stories are so well told that you can almost forgive the misogyny. Reading these stories you genuinely feel transported to a 19th century French salon where an elderly gentleman sips his wine and tells you the story of the unforgettable beauty who lead him astray.

Eadweard says

I have a feeling that I wouldn't have liked the man in person (the whole aristocratic / monarchist / holier than thou thing) BUT, he sure could write. I'm not giving it five stars because I felt like it dragged a bit a few times (could have removed a page or two).

"Like everything else that provokes malice and envy, birth exercises over the very people who most bitterly reject its claims a physical ascendancy, which is perhaps the best proof of its rights. In time of Revolution this ascendancy is fiercely combated; it still makes itself felt by virtue of the very reaction it provokes. In more peaceable times it acts with a steady and persistent, though unacknowledged, force.
“Well, 182 … was one of these periods of tranquillity. … Liberalism, which was growing steadily under the shadow of the Constitutional Charter, as were its champions and watch-dogs in their borrowed kennel, had not as yet crushed the life out of that sentiment of loyalty which the return of the Princes from exile had raised to fever-heat in every heart. Say what you will, it was a proud moment for France, convalescent and once more monarchical; the knife of successive Revolutions had cut her bosom to the quick, but full of hope and energy, she still dreamt she could live on thus mutilated, not as yet feeling in her veins the mysterious germs of the cancer that had long been gnawing at her vitals and must one day kill her."

"Their atheism was not the atheism of the eighteenth century, from which, however, it had sprung. The atheism of the eighteenth century made some pretensions to truth and thought. It reasoned, was sophistical, declamatory, and, above all, impertinent. But it did not possess the insolence of the weather-beaten veterans of the Empire, and the regicide apostates of ’93. We who have come after these men, have also our atheism; absolute, concentrated, wise, icy, and hating with an implacable hate, and having for all religious matters the hate of the insect for the beam it bores into. But neither of these forms of atheism could give an idea of the inveterate atheism of the men of the beginning of the century, who being brought up like dogs by their fathers, the Voltairians, had plunged their hands up to the shoulders in all the horrors of politics and war, and the manifold corruptions which spring from them."
