In 1880, the year before Hardy began to plan his discreetly daring Two on a Tower, Maupassant published one of his first, and best-known, short stories, 'Boule de Suif'. Boule de Suif, a patriotic Rouen prostitute, is its heroine, and the tale tells how, when northern France has been overrun and occupied by the Prussians in 1870, she is compelled to sleep with a Prussian officer in order that her travelling companions (a Count, a Councillor, a rich merchant and two nuns: respectable, self-serving and unpatriotic) can continue their flight from danger. It is a cynical story – its satire, though, implicit with humanity – whose main action concerns a prostitute plying her trade, in this case against her will; sex in a hotel bedroom.

Maupassant was a realist, and 'Boule de Suif' first appeared in an anthology of Franco-Prussian war stories by young disciples of the leading realist (or naturalist) of the day, Emile Zola. This 1880 anthology, Les Soirées de Médan, was a kind of group manifesto, and marked the neap tide of French realism, whose controlling moon was Zola. Born, like Hardy, in 1840, he had published the first eight of his twenty Rougon-Macquart novels, and was in successful mid-career.

The Pléiade edition of Maupassant’s Contes reminds us that the subject – the prostitute – was not new. In the 1870s there had been something of a fashion for low-life and prostitute themes in French fiction, the most notorious example being Zola’s own story of the courtesan Nana (1880). Zola tended to be emphatically frank about sex. But even in 1865, the Goncourts’ novel about a servant, Germinie Lacerteux, shows how the protagonist, Germinie, in poverty and misfortune, is forced to solicit on the street. The book explores her make-up and sexual psychology interestingly, and not without compassion.
Behind her and Zola, of course, lives Flaubert’s memorable realist
depiction of the life of the provincial adulteress Emma Bovary (1857).
Flaubert was a friend and mentor of Maupassant. Behind it, perhaps,
we may point to the younger Dumas’ *La Dame aux Camélias* (1848),
the ‘tart with a heart of gold’ (source of Verdi’s *La Traviata*), and
Murger’s *Scènes de la vie de bohème* (1847–9) (source of Puccini’s *La
Bohème*), where starving artists have lovers in their left bank garrets.
And behind them live the fictional worlds of Balzac and Stendhal
in the 1830s.

Unlike the Victorian novel, sensitive to the expectations of the
British matron and her maiden daughter, its distribution largely
controlled by the circulating library system (Mudie and Smith),
matters such as the direct, realistic analysis of love and marriage,
and so sex – and, many would argue, the aspirations of women seen
as authentic individuals – were more liberally ordered in France.
Balzac’s Lucien de Rubempré takes actress Coralie as his mistress in
*Illusions perdues* (1837–9); or, preeminent for love psychology and
Mozartian sexual intrigue, there is Stendhal’s *Le rouge et le noir* (1830).
Its heroine, Madame de Rénal, seduced though she is by Julien
Sorel, is moreover an ‘âme généreuse’; Stendhal is on her side.

Balzac was inspired by Sir Walter Scott, grandfather of the great
nineteenth-century narrative novel. But in the general preface to
his *Comédie humaine* (1842), he criticises Scott’s heroines; they are,
to use George Moore’s word, ‘dolls’, their flesh and blood reality
undermined by what Balzac saw as Scott’s idealising, Protestant
conventionality:

Walter Scott, obliged as he was to conform to the ideas of an
essentially hypocritical nation, was false to humanity in his picture
of woman, because his models were schismatics. The Protestant
woman . . . may be chaste, pure, virtuous; but her unexpansive
love will always be as calm and methodical as the fulfilment
of a duty . . . . In Protestantism there is no possible future for
the woman who has sinned . . . there is but one Woman, while
the Catholic writer finds a new woman in each new situation. If
Walter Scott had been a Catholic, if he had set himself the task of
describing truly the various phases of society which have successively
existed in Scotland . . . [he] might have admitted passion with
its sins and punishments, and the virtues revealed by repentence.
Passion is the sum-total of humanity. Without passion, religion,
romance, art, would all be useless.