



CLAUDINE AT THE WORKSHOP: THE IMPACT OF WILLY AND HIS SECRETARIES ON COLETTE'S WRITING

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COLETTE AND WILLY

1893 :
Mariage

1906 : Break-
up

1910 : Divorce

Sidonie Gabrielle Colette known as **Colette**
(1873-1954)

- ❖ One of the greatest French authors
- ❖ *Claudine* (1900-1903) published under the sole signature of Willy

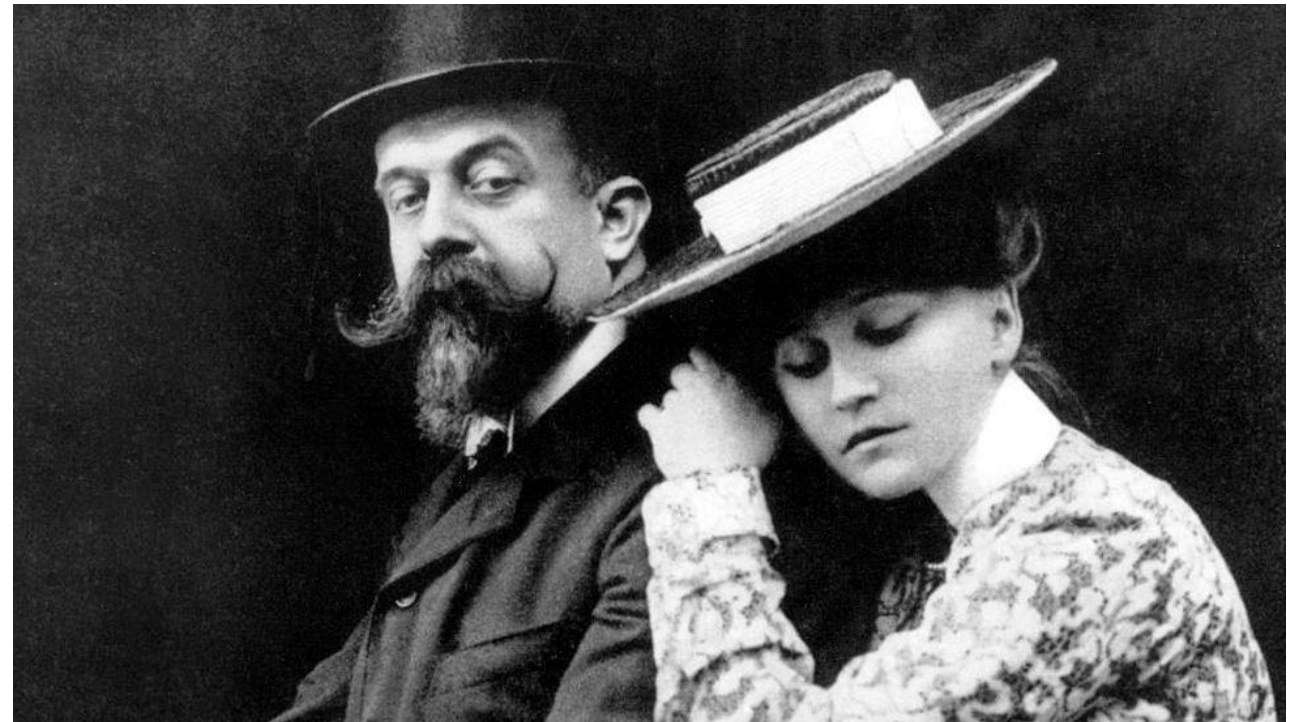
Henry Gauthier-Villars known as **Willy** (1859-1931)

- ❖ Colette's first husband
- ❖ Music critic
- ❖ « *Auteur gai* » : producer of good words and puns

Claudine series: *Claudine à l'école* (1900); *Claudine à Paris* (1901), *Claudine en ménage* (1902) and *Claudine s'en va* (1903)

1900-1903 :
Publication of
the *Claudine*
series

1907 : Official
separation



Colette and Willy around 1900

WHO WROTE THE *CLAUDINE*?

- ❖ According to Colette: minimal (or even non-existent) involvement of Willy in the writing
 - ❖ 1907: transfer of the rights for the *Claudine* series to Ollendorff and the Mercure de France by Willy, without Colette knowing it
 - ❖ 1909: Colette discovers the sale
 - ❖ From 1909: Colette claims to be the sole author of *Claudine*
- ❖ Problem: the manuscript of *Claudine à l'école* has disappeared (the other 3: held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France)

« Est-ce que M. Willy, dès le départ, vous a aidée à écrire *Claudine*, par des conversations, par exemple, en vous indiquant des personnages ou des situations ?

Plutôt par des indications, mais ça ne peut pas s'appeler une aide... »

Colette et André Parinaud, *Mes vérités : entretiens avec André Parinaud* (1949)

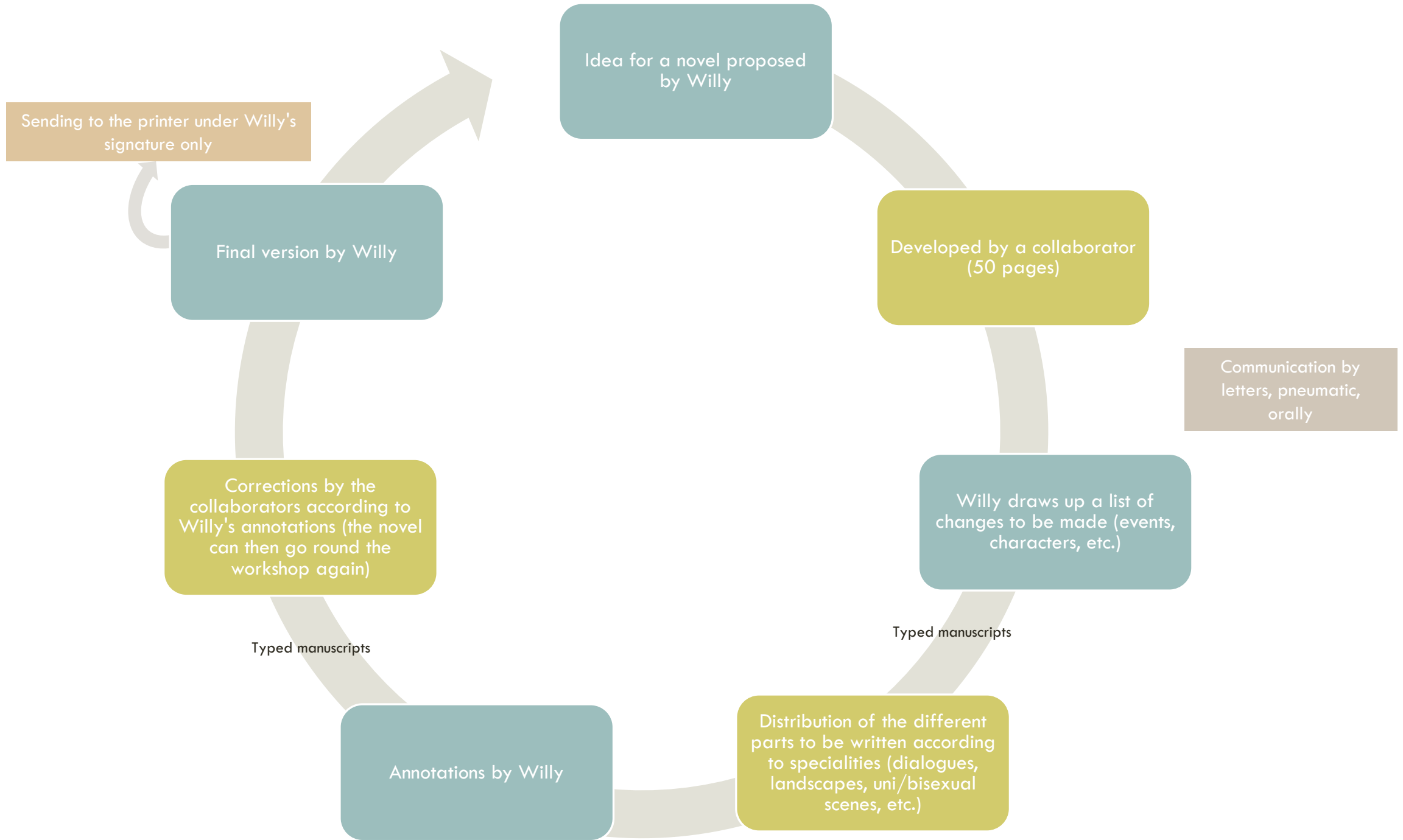
WILLY'S WORKSHOP: INDUSTRIALISING LITERATURE



PIERRE VEBER
D'après un croquis-charge de G. Léandre.



- ❖ Operated from 1894 to 1925
- ❖ Gathered a troop of “collaborators” or “secretaries” (about 50 over 30 years) employed to write novels published under the sole name of Willy



« DANS LE TEMPS QUE NOUS TRAVAILLIONS AUX ATELIERS... »

- ❖ Colette: member of the workshop
 - ❖ Willy commissioned her to write the sequels to *Claudine à l'école* (1901-1903), *Minne* (1904) and *Les Égaréments de Minne* (1905)
 - ❖ Participates in the writing of *Un petit vieux bien propre* (1907)
- ❖ Monthly allowance (300 francs per month)

« Nous autres les anciens, Pierre Veber, Vuillermoz, l'excellent « Cur » prince des gastronomes, Marcel Boulestin, et moi, nous avons gardé l'habitude, quand nous évoquons notre passé de dupes, de dire : « Dans le temps que nous travaillions aux ateliers... » »

Colette, *Mes Apprentissages* (1935)



Colette and Willy around 1905

WHAT INTERVENTIONS FROM WILLY IN *CLAUDINE À L'ÉCOLE*?

- ❖ Colette wrote the first draft entirely: a method “different” from the usual procedure used by Willy
- ❖ Willy most probably revised the manuscript: cf. manuscripts kept at the Bibliothèque nationale de France
 - ❖ From preserved manuscripts: text submitted as it was being written
 - ❖ Did he review it alone? Curnonsky had the manuscript in his hands but, according to his testimony, refused to touch it
- ❖ Nature of Willy's interventions:
 - ❖ Cuts
 - ❖ Corrections/ modifications/ rewriting
 - ❖ Additions

A METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

❖ Willy's style... what does it look like?

- ❖ Some of his works are co-authored, and the works signed with his name alone were most likely co-authored.
- ❖ As a result, a classic approach to the attribution of authority cannot be easily applied: how, for example, can we teach an AI to recognise Willy's pen if we have no example to provide of his style?

❖ Qui fait quoi dans l'atelier ?

- ❖ Beyond Willy, the problem comes from the possible interventions of other members of the workshop
- ❖ Various authors have been able to carry out a number of minor or major operations on the texts of their co-disciples, Colette in particular.

THE MAN WHO DID NOT WRITE

- ❖ Willy would not consider himself a writer
- ❖ Horror of the blank page: he needed a written text that he could change as he pleased
- ❖ “Refusal to write” evident in all his correspondence
 - ❖ Gives detailed instructions to his collaborators - sometimes as long as the text requested
 - ❖ Genuine satisfaction in proofreading/editing/rewriting

« Le « cas Willy » présente une singularité unique : l’homme qui n’écrivait pas avait plus de talent que ceux qui écrivaient en son lieu et place. »

Colette, *Mes Apprentissages* (1935)

THE WILLY EFFECT

- ❖ Adding the “Willy” touch to the workshop texts
 - ❖ Rewriting
 - ❖ Changes/ corrections/ cuts
 - ❖ Adding bon mots, puns and witticisms
- ❖ Creating a consistent style from texts by different authors
 - ❖ Coherent literary work: circulation of characters from novel to novel
- ❖ Between the studio of a renaissance master and Andy Warhol's Factory

OUR TIP

- ❖ Many of the workshop's authors have continued their literary careers outside the Willy circle.
- ❖ What is the difference between:
 - ❖ the texts they wrote in collaboration with Willy ;
 - ❖ the texts they wrote afterwards, without his direct intervention or influence?
- ❖ This difference can be taken as an approximation of what we call the **Willy Effect**:
 - ❖ One can imagine that other factors come into play in what separates the texts written during the workshop and the later texts by the same authors - maturation of style, biographical events, other encounters and influences.
 - ❖ However, what is common to the texts of different authors under Willy's influence, and what is not found afterwards, can reasonably be considered as the direct or indirect effect of his personal work and organisation.

THE CORPUS

- ❖ Novels by Paul Acker, Maurice Edmond Sailland (known as Curnonsky), Jeanne Marais, Jean de Tinan, Léo Trézenik and Pierre Veber.
- ❖ Ocerised then corrected.
 - ❖ Long but relatively easy to ocerise (Tesseract).
 - ❖ Difficult to systematise post-correction - too many puns, especially in the texts from Willy's time, which makes a classic solution such as pyspellchecker confusing.
- ❖ Divided into two groups: novels written with Willy, and novels written alone.

METHOD

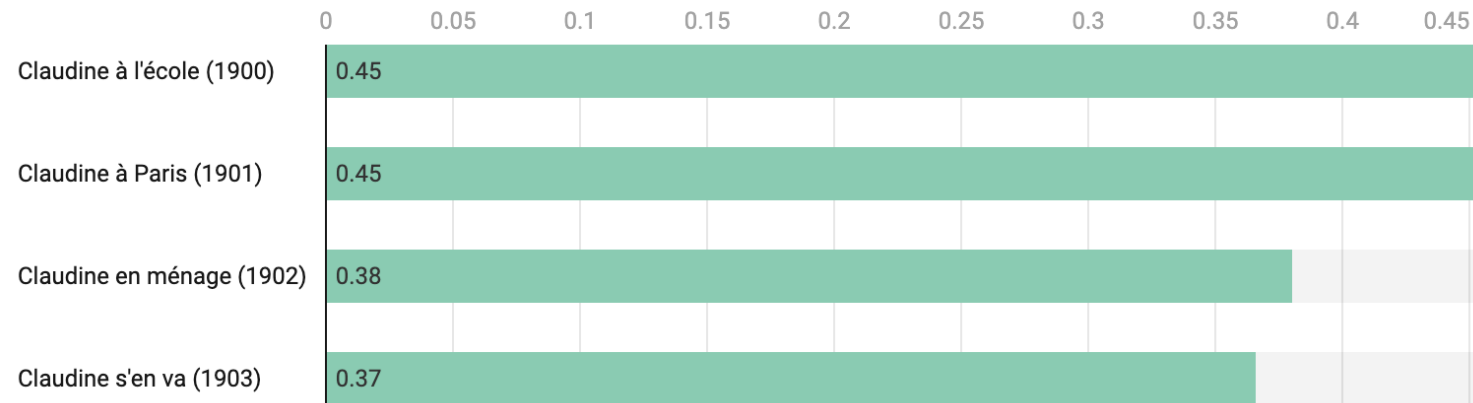
Multi-level profiling

- ❖ To extract as much information as possible from our reference texts, we sequence each of them into bi-grams and trigrams of characters, words and bi-grams of words.
- ❖ We train a Support-vector Machine (SVM) to distinguish between texts written with Willy and those written without Willy. It is given as input all the n-grams of characters, all the words, and the most frequent bi-grams of words (not all of them, for computability reasons).
- ❖ The aim is to obtain the greatest finesse in the analysis. To do this, we would like the AI to perform well on the shortest possible portions of text.
- ❖ Best performance obtained for slices of 3000 words (Accuracy and recall: 100%)
- ❖ Principle of rolling stylometry (Eder, 2019; Cafiero & Camps 2021): the AI gives its result on the impact of Willy on a portion of text from the 1st to the 3000th word; then the result is shifted to obtain the result from the 1001st to the 4000th word, from the 2001st to the 5000th etc.

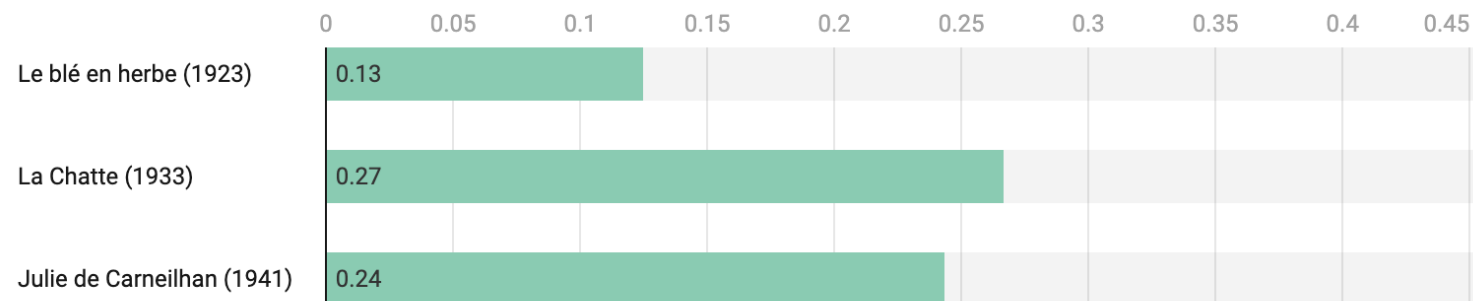
RESULTS

Pourcentage du texte impacté par un "Effet Willy"

Avec Willy



Seule



Percentage of text affected by a "Willy Effect"

A WILLY EFFECT ON COLETTE'S WORK?

- ❖ Willy's imprint can be read in Colette's early works
- ❖ It also seems to persist over time, which raises several questions.
 - ❖ Is this an artefact? Is our AI overestimating the impact of Willy? Possibly, but it's hard to confirm, or to understand why.
 - ❖ Willy's influence would have lasted, impacting Colette's style even after their separation. As her early years as an author took place in this workshop, this would not be so surprising

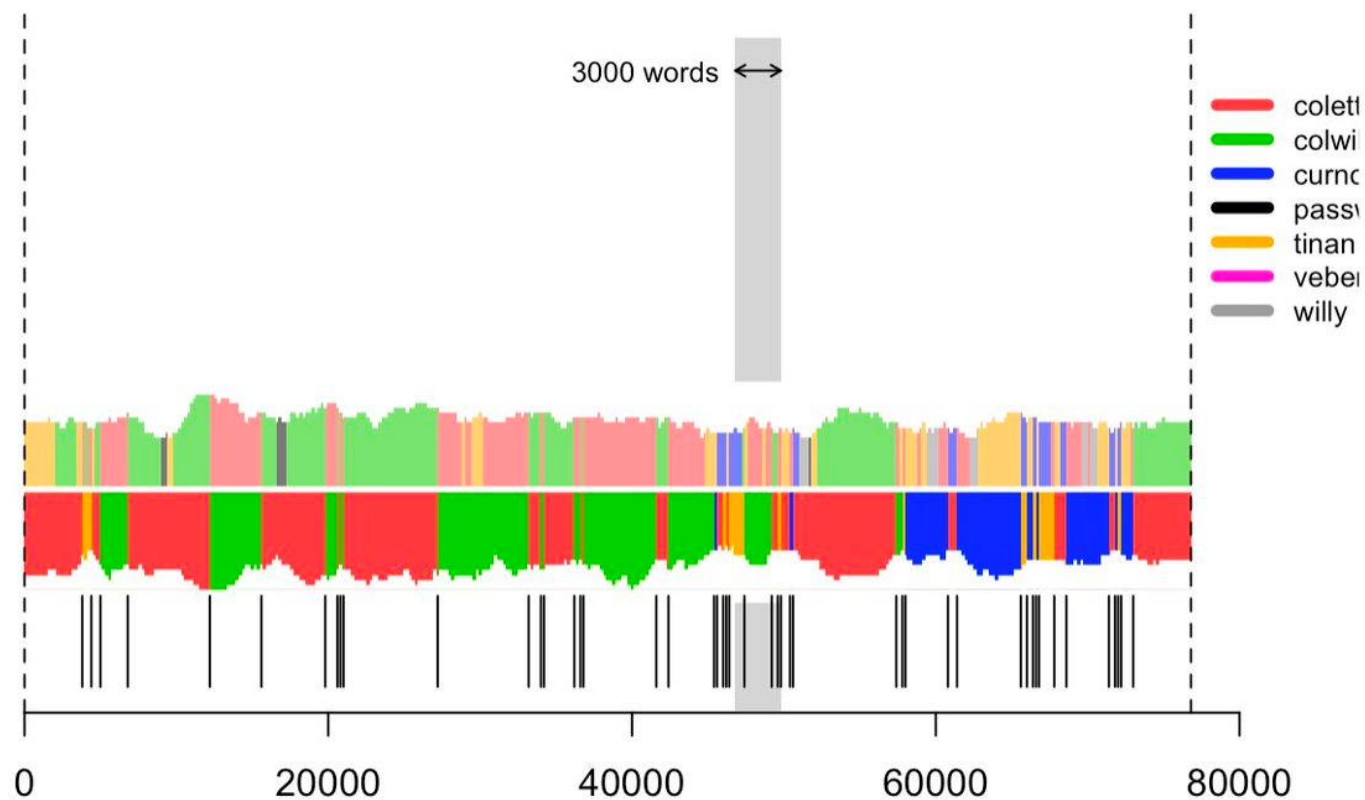
COLETTE'S APPRENTICESHIPS

- ❖ Training in writing in the workshop: a real “learning contract” for Colette
 - ❖ Lessons in writing and story structuring given by Willy to the workshop's collaborators
 - ❖ Colette's continuous practice of writing from the beginning of her marriage: novels, but also correspondence and journalism (collaboration with La Cocarde and La Fronde)
 - ❖ Advice and criticism from Willy
- ❖ Influence of the early years perceptible throughout Colette's career
 - ❖ Repetition of the motifs present in the Claudines throughout her texts
 - ❖ Permanently shapes her perception of writing and the literary world

WILLY, COLETTE AND THE OTHERS?

- ❖ The influence of Willy's workshop on Colette's work would have persisted, as she continued to interact with other members even after leaving it.
- ❖ To find out for sure about this last hypothesis, we tried a new exploration.
- ❖ Could one of the other members of the workshop have influenced Colette? To find out, we use a classic rolling stylometry framework (package 'stylo') in the same configuration as our profiler (SVM, 3000 word window), to identify passages of text that are not purely Colette's.

ROLLING STYLOMETRY



« RIEN NE SAURAIT EXPRIMER MA PASSION INTELLECTUELLE POUR CELLE QUI VIENT DE DISPARAÎTRE* »

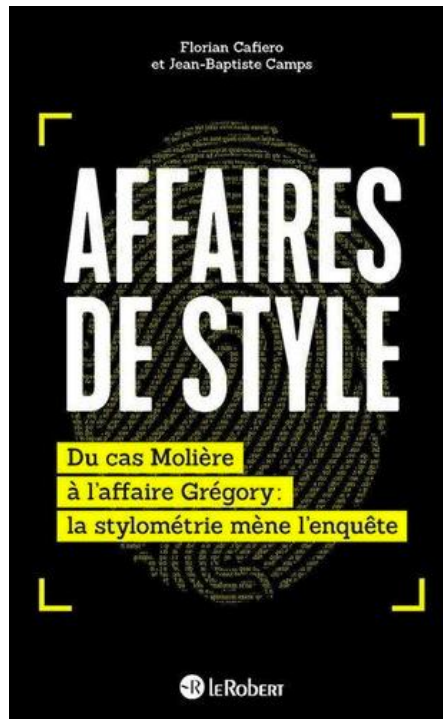


Maurice Edmond Sailland known
as Curnonsky (1972-1956)

- ❖ A lifetime friendship between Curnonsky and Colette
 - ❖ Workshop colleagues - even worked with Colette on *Un petit vieux bien propre* (1907)
 - ❖ Curnonsky showed great admiration for Colette
- ❖ Obviously, Curnonsky intervened on *Claudine à l'école*
 - ❖ Backed Colette's version about *Claudine à l'école* : hides his interventions probably out of friendship
 - ❖ Difficult to know the nature of the interventions: those which, according to him, were made by Willy?

*Curnonsky, *Souvenirs littéraires et gastronomiques*, 1958.

DONE AND TO DO



- ❖ The first results are reported in our chapter on women authors in a recently published book.
- ❖ But there are still many tasks ahead
 - ❖ Extending the corpus of Colette and other authors.
 - ❖ Can we better understand the interventions made by Willy and his workshop?
 - ❖ Are they large-scale interventions, general indications, cuts, micro-corrections?
- ❖ Idea: adjust the focus of our tools, to understand whether Willy's influence seems greater when we look at details of the work, or when we consider it in its entirety.
 - ❖ Spoiler: according to our preliminary results, it seems that Willy influences the global plan rather than the details.

Shameful self-promotional page



THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION !

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