

a natural death, unlike almost all their exclusively heterosexual royal rivals in France, the Capetians.

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### RIMBAUD, ARTHUR (1854-1891)

French symbolist poet. The son of an army officer who deserted his wife and family in 1860, he had an unhappy childhood under his mother's harsh discipline that may explain the spirit of adolescent rebellion that characterizes his first poems, written in 1870-71. Some of these astonishingly mature pieces attack those in authority, while others dream of a different world of total freedom. The most celebrated is "Le Bateau ivre," in which the poet imagines himself as a boat completely out of control, drifting wildly down rivers, into seas, and across oceans. Immediately after writing this poem, he set off for Paris in September 1871, where he was welcomed by Paul Verlaine, ten years his senior, whose unorthodox versification appealed to him. He then put into practice the code that he had formulated in his famous "Lettre du voyant" of May 1871, that the poet should sharpen his perception by submitting to every sort of experience and then transmitting what he has perceived directly, without conscious control.

Nearly all of his poetry belongs to the period of his homosexual love affair with Verlaine, which ended in July 1873 when the two quarreled violently and the older man shot him in the wrist. He had broken away from verse forms and adopted the prose poem in a group of some forty passages called the *Illuminations*, which however obscure in meaning, have a unique and compelling poetic quality that springs from the vividness of the imagery, the rhythm of the phrases, and the directness of the language. In the summer of 1873 he

wrote *Une Saison en enfer*, again in an obscure but often compelling prose, in which he admitted to having lived in a fool's paradise and to have spent a "season in hell" with his lover.

After this he abandoned literature, and in a sense abandoned life, becoming a solitary wanderer, first in Europe and then the East Indies, and finally in Ethiopia, where he may have had some homosexual liaisons with the natives. He died in a hospital in Marseille in 1891 at the age of 37, indifferent to the extraordinary reputation as a youthful genius of the poetic that he had acquired after Verlaine wrote an essay on him in his *Poètes maudits* in 1884.

The homosexual elements in Rimbaud's work are slight, even if the creative period of his life was one of his liaison with Verlaine, and some modern critics have seen in his adolescent eroticism the key to his life's work, a rebellion that transcends the mere personal and culminates in the shattering of society's moral conventions and the negation of its traditional values. By seeking inspiration through narcotics that placed him on the margin of respectable society and its realm of experience, Rimbaud reinforced the image of the poet as outsider, as one who has the right to create his own mode of expression rather than adhering to the received canons of literature. He remains the unmatched archetype of the adolescent poet whose homoerotic feelings lifted him far above the imitation of which most youthful writers alone would be capable—into the sphere of creative genius.

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