



# *agrippina the younger* teaching guide

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## **note to instructors**

Enclosed are compiled materials to aid you in teaching and leading discussions surrounding Diana Arterian's *Agrippina the Younger: Poems* (Northwestern University Press/Curbstone). This includes supplementary and complementary texts, discussion questions, and writing prompts.

These are assembled in the hopes to support instructors of literature, creative writing, poetry, and gender studies classes. Please do not hesitate to reach out regarding the enclosed materials and prompts if they went well and/or were enhanced by your own interventions.

If you would like to have Diana Arterian visit your classroom (in person or digitally), please contact her at **diana@dianaarterian.com**.

If you need desk copies or have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out to Northwestern University Press or Diana directly at the following email addresses:

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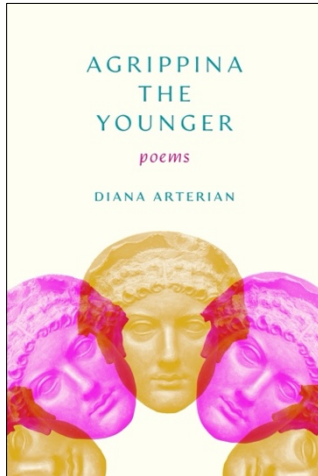
Thank you for considering *Agrippina the Younger* for your curriculum.



# *agrippina the younger: poems*

agrippina teaching guide

diana arterian



## **A poetic journey through the past of the Roman Empress Agrippina looks toward the future**

*Agrippina the Younger* follows one woman's study of another, separated by thousands of miles and two millennia but bound by a shared sense of powerlessness. Agrippina was a daughter in a golden political family, destined for greatness—but she hungered for more power than women were allowed. Exhausted by the misogyny of the present, Diana Arterian reaches into the past to try to understand the patriarchal systems of today. In lyric verse and prose poems, she traces Agrippina's rise, interrogating a life studded with intrigue, sex, murder, and manipulation. Arterian eagerly pursues Agrippina through texts, ruins, and films, exhuming the hidden details of the ancient noblewoman's life. These poems consider the valences of patriarchy, power, and the archive to try to answer the question: How do we recover a woman erased by history?

**Winner of the Poetry Society of America's 2026 William Carlos Williams Award • Winner of the Medal Provocateur from the Eric Hoffer Awards • Finalist for the *Big Other* Reader's Choice Award • Named a Best Poetry Collection by *Electric Literature* & *Ms. Magazine* • Featured by *Lit Hub*, *NewPages*, & *Poetry Northwest***

“By stepping toward, instead of running from, the ancient histories of women-hatred, Arterian somehow excavates these legacies with a language and lyricism that holds our horror and beauty in sublime balance. “She does not look away...” — **ROBIN COSTE LEWIS**

“In exquisitely braided prose and verse, Diana Arterian gives us an enthralling study of the often maligned and more often overlooked Agrippina the Younger. Necessarily suspicious and critical of official narratives, Arterian dares to ‘pluck the thread’ of time-worn accounts passed down to us from patriarchy. In this stunningly lyrical book—rigorously researched and rigorously imagined—we hear history as lies but also lyre: an instrument, in Arterian's hands, attentively tuned and pitch perfect with song.” — **BRANDON SOM**

“In Arterian's vision, women have ferocious agency. This is the reclamation of a woman overlooked alongside documentation of the author's own obsessively searching for Agrippina, which is itself a mirror portrait of a contemporary woman reaching across centuries. This feminist collection is both a timeline and a map.” — **DIANA KHOI NGUYEN, *BOMB***

“I felt infected with the loving obsession that drove the writing of this book...[H]istory and the dead demand our time, rage, ambition, and attention, and this is ultimately the voice that *Agrippina the Younger* amplifies with fury and grace.” — **EMILY VAN DUYNE, *LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS***



**DIANA ARTERIAN** is the author of the poetry collection *Playing Monster :: Seiche*, which received a starred review in *Publishers Weekly*, and has received fellowships at Banff, Millay Arts, and Yaddo. A twice-finalist for the National Poetry Series, her writing has featured by The Academy of American Poets, *BOMB*, *Harvard Review*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *NPR*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Poetry*, and elsewhere. A poetry editor for Noemi Press, Arterian writes “The Annotated Nightstand” column at *Lit Hub*. She lives in Los Angeles.



## complementary & supplementary texts

pieces, interviews, & titles worth sharing with your students

**Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck”**

<http://bit.ly/3K6C1yZ>

**Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Ozymandias”**

<http://bit.ly/3Vn2cUA>

**Cecilia Vicuña, “The Disappeared” (tr. Rosa Alcalá)**

<http://bit.ly/3I6cSnv>

**Joy Harjo, “Remember”**

<http://bit.ly/4gsb8BL>

**“Mary Beard’s Favourite Objects”**

<http://bit.ly/4pHZEhI>

**Diana Arterian, “10 Books About History’s Infinite, Unsung Inheritances”**

<http://bit.ly/468LFcX>

**Interview with Doireann Ní Ghríofa, *Between the Covers*/Milkweed**

<http://bit.ly/4nca07R>

**Interview with Tyehimba Jess, *Between the Covers*/Milkweed**

<http://bit.ly/4nI0edz>

**Michael Ondaatje, *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (Vintage)**

<http://bit.ly/4pqQ2aQ>

**Alison C. Rollins, *Black Bell* (Copper Canyon Press)**

<http://bit.ly/48j8Pi7>

**Laura Da’, *Instruments of the True Measure* (University of Arizona Press)**

<http://bit.ly/46sqEsL>



## conversations & interviews

**Interview with David Naimon, *Between the Covers***

<https://bit.ly/4dIqP8c>

**Interview with Diana Khoi Nguyen, *BOMB***

<http://bit.ly/47OMXLw>

**Interview with Ruth Madievsky, *Creative Independent***

<https://bit.ly/4dQsY07>

**Interview on *Enjambments*, Academy of American Poets**

<http://bit.ly/4mfnhLn>

**Interview with Tiffany Troy, *Tupelo Quarterly***

<https://bit.ly/3RV6cNk>

**Interview with Iris Jamahl Dunkle, *Finding Lost Voices***

<https://bit.ly/4vm1Ddv>

**Interview on *PoetryNow***

<http://bit.ly/4miwtyz>

Additional interviews and information can be found at [dianaarterian.com](http://dianaarterian.com)



## **essays**

prose by arterian on the themes of the book

**The Poetry Foundation, “An Argument for Counter-Monument Poetics”**

<http://bit.ly/3VWkPPa>

***Literary Hub*, “Power, Motherhood, & Murder: On the Life and Death of Agrippina the Younger”**

<http://bit.ly/4mnFaaW>

**Northwestern University Press Blog, “My Roman Empire: Claudia Octavia”**

<http://bit.ly/4mkmIQA>



## reviews & judge's citation

Poetry Society of America

2026 William Carlos Williams Award judge's citation by Alan Gilbert

<https://bit.ly/4nX2hLY>

An initial reading of Diana Arterian's powerful *Agrippina the Younger* might understand it as a research-driven resuscitation of a Roman noblewoman's life. But circulating beneath this like the blood so frequently shed in the book's poems is a dark and at times unflinching depiction of the violence flowing through almost any political system, one that also doesn't spare its overlords and overladies, however much more pervasively directed at its plebs.

Narrating a history of early dynastic Rome in a mix of poetry and prose, *Agrippina the Younger* makes it clear, without being didactically explicit, how much this violence is still with us and how insane a ruler can be. Yes, this brutality is rooted in what is now called toxic masculinity, but the women of *Agrippina the Younger* have imbibed it too, including its eponymous empress and mother

The historical succession of deaths, murders, and betrayals begins to feel inexorable with each turning page (and the millennia since), yet Arterian's carefully crafted poems are nuanced to the details of everyday life and interspersed with moments of compassion. After all, from her birth on the frontiers of the Roman Empire in 15 CE, Agrippina the Younger was always fighting for her life: "I want her to have / power of command here too // to slow the inevitable / down to tenderness." Threaded into this narrative is Arterian's personal archeological search for hidden histories and the voice and forms with which to express them.



## History's Back Staircases by Emily Van Duynes

in *los angeles review of books*

<http://bit.ly/4gzGUwK>

I once dreamed I was at an archive that was also a restaurant, with natural light and vaulted ceilings, filled with long wooden tables with benches on either side. The servers brought menus from which you could order archival materials; mine included “Angie Bowie’s fake fingernails from the Ziggy Stardust tour” and “Sylvia Plath’s red bandana.” This was the rag-and-bone shop of my heart, a single sunny place that distilled the ephemera of the dead and longed-for into a made-to-order catalog. Small quests, easily completed. In my waking life, by contrast, I have chased after Sylvia Plath, but she never comes fully into view, despite having published a book about her last July.

It’s possible that my longtime obsession with Plath, as well as the lengths I’ve gone to feed it, makes me the ideal reader for the latest book by Los Angeles poet Diana Arterian. *Agrippina The Younger* (2025) charts the life, death, and politically constructed afterlife of the titular Roman empress, whose son, Nero, had her stabbed to death in 59 CE. Agrippina wrote three memoirs in her lifetime, including the only primary description of childbirth from the classical world. All three were lost or destroyed. We only know of them because of historians like Pliny the Elder, who “references / Agrippina’s memoir with no direct quotation” in his volume *Of Prodigious and Monstrous Births*. *Agrippina* considers the ways that men mythologize the lives of women such as the eponymous empress, a practice that “continues even as the buildings she moved through have begun to crumble back to the earth.”

Plath’s 20th-century dwellings are still standing. But I recently found myself peering into the basement crawl space where she famously hid herself for three days, during a suicide attempt in the summer of 1953. The crawl space peered back. As we turned to leave the narrow, crowded room, my friend Joy hissed at me to grab the piece of concrete wedged between a wall and a drainpipe. Its edges crumbled in my fingers as I stashed it in my bag, which, on my flight out of Logan Airport, I decided to check at the last minute. I was flooded with a sinking terror that the TSA would take my rock, which did and did not contain the basement crawl space that once held Sylvia Plath, overdosing at the age of 20.

Containment is Arterian’s subject. The murder of Agrippina opens the book in vile, irresistible verse that contorts the empress with great intention and expansion, until she holds the whole of history in her mouth and smiles back at us “with her [...] bloody eyeteeth.” The apocryphal story of Agrippina’s murder says that she ordered her assassins to stab her in the belly, the place that once housed her son and killer. Rather than ponder the truth of this, Arterian writes that Nero has his mother “cut down / the middle to see / the womb that formed him.”

Nero peers in, but this abyss has purchase: Agrippina’s dead uterus grows a monstrous flower, engulfing him in a darkness so total he “burned prisoners / in his garden for light.” So much for Nietzsche, and for the moment, good riddance. Writing an early draft of this, I laughed out loud as I typed, and quickly deleted, a summary of Agrippina’s famed historical relations: ~~sister of Caligula, mother of Nero, wife of her uncle, Claudius~~. The erasure was my knee-jerk 21st-century feminist reaction (*woman as her own self, adjunct to no man*). True enough, but it’s difficult not to note a woman’s male



relations when it's *these* men. And yet I could not bring myself to remove the black lines slashed through the men who slashed at Agrippina. Arterian is a fine storyteller, moving the reader deftly between Agrippina's real and imagined histories and the poet's present-day search for her. The book is cleverly paced, arranged so that Arterian's quests seem to reveal Agrippina's secrets. Before long, I felt infected with the loving obsession that drove the writing of this book. I wanted to protect its subject.

The opening, more traditionally lyric poems sliver down the page in terse, enjambed couplets, offering debauched feminist images of ancient Rome. I was initially bugged to turn the page and discover long prose meditations on the historical events of Agrippina's life: her birth abroad while her father, the idealized general Germanicus, was on campaign in Germany; marriage at 13 to a red-bearded bastard said to have deliberately run down a child with his chariot; selection as a vestal virgin by Caligula before he exiled her; motherhood; empresshood; assassination. I briefly thought, reading this section, that the book had become boring, and put it down. But *Agrippina* called me back. It felt heavy, it wanted me. The shape of the book came into focus, its historical meditations interspersed with Arterian's experiences walking through Agrippina's landscapes as she attempted to "collapse the disk of time, stand beside her." Reading and rereading *Agrippina*, I searched hard for anything I might have missed. I was brooding, immersed in a heaviness that no longer felt estranging, one of danger and desire, other worlds and lives that refuse immediately to give way.

Arterian's aloof, elegant prose reads like a pragmatic dream, which, ideally, is what travel is. It's all well and good to envision yourself on the Palatine Hill at dusk, in a laurel wreath, but getting there is another matter entirely, and if you don't plan it with precision, you might find yourself there on the wrong day, jet-lagged, locked out of history and wearing a baseball hat to cover your unwashed hair. Arterian tramping halfway across the world to occupy the places her idol once inhabited might strike the reader as impractical, if not insane, an enterprise undertaken by the flighty or the foolish. But having taken many similar trips myself in search of Plath, I can attest to the calculated necessity of strategy when pursuing the dead: committing the strange names and odd schedules of provincial churches or ruins to memory, tracing and retracing a path on the moors to ensure you recall the way back from a specific footpath that may or may not hold Assia Wevill's ashes. Seeking out the island where Caligula exiled Agrippina, Arterian writes: "Everyone has the same names, is sent to the same archipelago. [...] I read and read but can't know for sure." While touring Agrippina's great-grandmother Livia's home, Arterian describes her obsessive pursuit and the assumptions people have about her research: "One woman sees my little flip notebook and asks if I'm a reporter. I want to open up and tell her everything, Agrippina and poetry, but just say, *No, no.*"

If brief conversations with strangers don't necessarily lend themselves to this kind of project, the forms Arterian chose for *Agrippina the Younger* suit it unusually well. In pages of blocky prose, Arterian describes chasing down Agrippina's sister Julia Livilla's funerary urn in the labyrinthine Vatican Museums and their accompanying website. She fields phone calls and emails from their staff in her desperate attempt to see the closest remnant of the woman closest to Agrippina, whose burial place remains in question. "Is she in there?" Arterian asks us. The text is italicized as though, perhaps, someone is speaking, as though someone *else* is speaking, a distant historian or a modern lecturer. Sometimes Arterian writes, "This is important as ..." in a series of notes at the bottom of certain pages; these are also italicized. She never elaborates on who "this" is important to, or what, precisely "this" importance is, since these occasional footnotes are always attached to the whole of



the text, rather than to a particular detail. Here is another open space for mystery made by Arterian, voices commingling and ventriloquized in the jigsaw of the collection.

While the forms in the book feel unwieldy at first, the events and their historiographies prove to be even more so. That, of course, is their intrigue, and power. Through Arterian's careful study and poetics, all of us have the chance to troop down history's back staircases, trying at once to preserve the dusty footprints underfoot and to make our own marks. *Agrippina's* form mirrors Arterian's devoted search. Some revelations are immediate, others followed by long silence: the blank space of the page, and then "the sky shows through the door holes like blue tombstones." Women in history and literature who are perceived as wild are often punished with a damning attention for that wildness, and so the moment when Arterian, accompanied by a friend, strips naked and slips into the Tyrrhenian Sea, in order to swim out in search of a better view of the ruins where Agrippina was once exiled, feels like both a kinship and a delicious rebellion. I think back to my own travels with friends to London, Boston, Yorkshire, knocking on strangers' doors in the hope that they might let us into Plath's former dwellings. "I nearly fell to my knees," one friend wrote to me after visiting Plath's grave for the first time. About Agrippina, Arterian writes: "[I]t's possible I stared into the dark boundless space of her life because, while I didn't know it yet, its narrative elements might also serve as a lesson—if one looked closely enough. So, I peer." Graves don't talk back; neither does the sea. But through both, history and the dead demand our time, rage, ambition, and attention, and this is ultimately the voice that *Agrippina the Younger* amplifies with fury and grace.



## more reviews

“*Agrippina the Younger*—namely, the Roman empress who was the fourth wife of the emperor Claudius and the mother of the next emperor, Nero, who reputedly arranged her assassination. Author: Diana Arterian, the author of two poetry collections, whose author’s note is mercifully assassination-free. Those two women are the co-stars of Arterian’s latest book, which narrates the life of the former in picked-clean, gap-riddled poems with historically exacting titles (‘Agrippina Becomes the First Noblewoman to Give Birth on Campaign Becomes the Elder in an Isolated Place Later Named After the Baby Future Empress Agrippina the Younger’), and catalogues the latter’s research on Agrippina in trustworthy, self-questioning prose poems: ‘I am here to collapse the disk of time, stand beside her. But these aren’t even all her same structures.’ *Agrippina the Younger* can sometimes read like two projects in one, each good enough to be published solo: the Agrippina poems add up to a verse biopic, lean and lived-in; the prose poems, a travelogue featuring Arterian herself as tour guide, armchair art historian, and immaculate endnoter. But the book’s sparks fly in the flinty friction between the two projects, between verse and prose—as in a poem on the thirteen-year-old Agrippina’s first wedding night, which finds Arterian hitting a limit: ‘Agrippina turns her face / toward or away you decide / I don’t want to imagine anymore.’” — **Christopher Spaide, *Literary Hub*** <http://bit.ly/4gDZ00r>

“In *Agrippina the Younger* by Diana Arterian (June, Curbstone), death has steps and time is but one mold. The grand and beguiling collection both receives and resists the epic stylistic as it traces Agrippina as person, figure, and remainder. With curious devotion and meticulous line breaks, the conditions of her time and the poet’s overlap and the story of erasure comes alive. The hope of meaning in the past, so concentrated in a person, is delicate and changing as the project seems to question itself: ‘How to engage with a place, with what you can’t build upon? What use of it? Perhaps it is all an uninspired metaphor for what I am up to—trying to dig through the palimpsest of time, holding different artifacts up to the light to discern their use.’ No detail is wasted in Arterian’s eye and no use is impossible; the past echoes into the present and future in eerie, bodily ways. One poem ends ‘I don’t want to imagine anymore’ as the work of wondering shifts to acts of realizations and the speaker, so often looking and asking, turns to Agrippina and herself each as indivisible wholes.” — **Nanya Jhingran and Cindy Ok, *Poetry Northwest*** <http://bit.ly/3K19xXt>



## discussion questions

- 1 Arterian includes epigraphs from Solmaz Sharif and Tacitus (an ancient Roman historian). What is the implication of the epigraphs for you? What of “study” Sharif describes, and the fact all Tacitus shares is from what “Older men heard and recorded”?
- 2 What are the different media Arterian looks at to try to understand Agrippina? Why do you think she reads/watches them?
- 3 What does the literature, both ancient and modern, show Arterian about Agrippina? Arterian herself? Society? History? Why include references to them in her collection, do you think?
- 4 Arterian has talked about how this book is as much about obsession as history. Why do you think Arterian became obsessed with Agrippina? What does she extrapolate from Agrippina’s life? What did the book bring up for you that Arterian might have missed?
- 5 What are the different poetic forms in the book? What do you notice about how Arterian uses space and shape? How do they impact the tone of the piece? What do you think these gestures denote in terms of location and time?
- 6 The book is broken up into three sections (with a few poems as a kind of prologue). Where do they fall in the chronology of Agrippina’s life? Why do you think Arterian put those breaks there?
- 7 Do you think everything from Agrippina’s life Arterian describes is “true”? Does this feel important? Why/why not?
- 8 Why do you think the poet includes herself in the book as a character (the “I” in the book)? Does Arterian’s “character” change at all? If so, what is her narrative arc? What would the collection be like without her?
- 9 What role does capital-h History play in the collection? How does it show up? What does it do in the poems, do you think? The book?
- 10 What exactly is “history”? What is your relationship to it? Did this collection approach history differently in any way? How does Arterian seem to feel about history?



## writing assignment one

### in-class assignment

At the end of her book, Arterian describes moving through a museum and encountering a sculpture of Agrippina, ending the poem with: “It is from something larger, a body lost to time.” What is something that feels to you, for one reason or another, “lost to time”? It can be anything—a relationship, a beloved object, a person or event who/that never made it into history books. Why might that loss be important? Why is it lost in the first place?

- 1 Free write about the lost person/thing/event for 3 minutes.
- 2 Free write for another 3 minutes about *why* this loss is so important.
- 3 Review what you have written and mark the thoughts, lines, images, and turns of phrase that stick out to you—what you feel is the beginning of something. If it feels exciting to you, try to have a line act as a starting point for several connected pieces, or incorporate all the lines into a single piece.



## writing assignment two

in-class assignment/follow-up assignment

Consider a specific person who is, in one way or another, important (personally, historically, mythologically). Free write about the figure for 3 minutes with the following questions (given by the instructor):

- 1 What are the feelings that come up when you think of this person or figure?
- 2 What are some of the defining events the person/figure experienced, or you think informed their lives?
- 3 What are the holes in their narrative/chronology? Do you know? What do you think they might be?
- 4 What are the ways *they* might describe a crucial moment in their lives?

Do some preliminary research on the person/figure—see what others have written about them (or the person wrote down themselves), and note what is missing. Perhaps there was a childbirth, or a move across the country. See what you can find in the local news or archives or family members about the person (if not mythological). Feel free to use lines from those to create found-text poems and see how they feel in conjunction with unique pieces of your own writing.



## writing assignment three

### extended assignment

Consider an obsession. It might be an object, phenomenon, person, place. Perhaps there is an object in a museum (see: *Voyage of the Sable Venus*) or a color (see: *Bluets*) or an historical figure (see: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*). For this assignment, you will write 10-15 poems of any type ABOUT the object of your obsession alongside more subjective pieces about your ENGAGEMENT with this obsession. You will likely find yourself learning new things about the source of your interest—and yourself—in the writing process.

- 1 For about five minutes make a list of things you are inexplicably drawn to. It could be a childhood toy, a family member you never met, an ancient building on the other side of the world, an historical event. Once you have 3-5 things, spend a little time with each. Which one fires something up inside?
- 2 Write out five or so vignettes on the source of your obsession (the person/object/place). Try to stay descriptive/objective. If you're writing about a physical thing, take time to look at it and write. If about a place, pull up photos and write. Conjure it in your mind.
- 3 Write (at least) as many pieces meditating on your feelings about the source of your obsession. Why does it have its hooks in you? Why are you so compelled by it? Did describing it reveal anything?
- 4 See how these poems might talk to each other. If you're writing about a person, how might *they* describe an experience? Or people who experience the material/object/place at a different time? Conjure/touch the obsession in ways that draw you: go deep in your mind, pull Tarot cards, cast a spell.
- 5 Once you have some pieces, shuffle them a bit and see how a different order feels. When you have organized the pieces in an order that makes them vibrate in a way you like, see what lines you can add to make their connections stronger/tighter.

### the following strategies are required for this assignment:

- narrative
- proactive organization

### consider using the following strategies:

- quotation
- repetition
- metaphor
- tense and/or tonal shift to differentiate the threads