



Research Article

Voices, Memory, and Identity in the First Lay of Guðrún: A Narratological Analysis

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Abstract

The *First Lay of Guðrún* (*Guðrúnarkviða I*) is one of the most intense and moving poems of the Poetic Edda. It is distinguished by its polyphonic structure and its exploration of individual grief through the interplay of multiple female voices. At the centre of the poem is Guðrún, wife of the hero Sigurðr, who confronts the trauma of his death and the betrayal of her brothers. An extradiegetic narrator introduces the mourning scene and presents Guðrún as initially silent and paralysed by grief. She is gradually prompted to speak through the interventions of other female figures, who recount their own experiences of mourning and suffering. Among them, Gullrönd plays a crucial role: by unveiling Sigurðr's body and recalling the love that once bound Guðrún to him, she enables the heroine to confront her loss and recover her voice. The succession of female voices thus creates an empathic chain in which individual experiences of suffering become part of a shared narrative of grief. This process moves Guðrún from silence to speech and from being the object of the narrator's gaze to becoming an active speaking subject. Her subsequent speech reconstructs the memory of her relationship with Sigurðr and articulates the loss of both her emotional and social identity. This article argues that the interaction between narrative voice, silence, memory, and female subjectivity constitutes a central structural principle of the poem. A narratological approach makes it possible to illuminate the different levels of discourse embedded within the lay and to interpret its multivoicedness as a form of poetic polyphony.

Keywords

Guðrúnarkviða I, Eddic Poetry, Narratology, Female Subjectivity, Memory

1. Introduction

This article discusses a remarkably intense and moving Eddic poem, the *First Lay of Guðrún* in Old Norse, also known by its editorial title, *Guðrúnarkviða I* [1]. The poem has been dated between the 11th and 12th centuries, and this broad time span reflects the general uncertainty surrounding the dating of the Eddic poems, which is one of the most debated issues

among scholars [2].

I will show how a narratological approach can be useful for analysing and discussing such a poem, which provides us with only limited, yet essential, narrative elements and features a constant interplay of different female voices.¹

Andreas Heusler [3] classified *Guðrúnarkviða I*, together

1 The poem survives in GKS (Gamle kongelige Samling) 2365 4^o; also known as the Codex Regius of the Poetic Edda (c. 1270), now held at the Árni Magnússon

Institute in Reykjavík. A digital version of the manuscript is available at the following link: <https://eae.ku.dk/q?p=eae/vols/text/1>.

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with a small group of other Eddic poems, as *weibliche Rückblickslieder*, translated by Daniel Sävborg as “retrospective women’s songs”. This classification was later discussed in relation to the category of Eddic “elegies”. [4]

To paraphrase the words of Margaret Clunies Ross, an eminent Eddic scholar who, back in 1990, defined Old Norse Eddic poetry as “an isle full of noise”, I would now like to propose my own definition of Eddic poems as “an archipelago full of stories and voices embedded within them” [5].

The kind of narrative that constitutes the underlying structure of a short poem such as *The First Lay of Guðrún* is fundamentally allusive: stories are evoked and hinted at rather than fully displayed or narrated, with all the details that a complete account would require. From this perspective, the application of narratological models or analytical tools to verse texts containing minimal narrative content might seem inappropriate.

Yet Eddic poems often contain so many allusions and references to past stories that the events they evoke are clearly present and relevant—not only as elements of the stories themselves, but also as part of a shared cultural heritage and as evidence of an ancient past familiar to the audience participating in the performance. In this sense, the many voices and different discourses embedded in the narrative often offer a distillation of the story, condensing information and references to legendary or mythological events. Through this allusiveness, an entire world of deeds attributed to gods and heroes can be evoked without having to narrate them in their entirety each time. This also reminds us that the Eddic poems, as they have been preserved in manuscripts, are the products of a long oral tradition that may have extended over several centuries. [6] Clearly, the surviving texts may differ considerably from the earlier versions performed and transmitted orally, as well as from the manner in which traditional legendary narratives were originally shaped into verse.

The aim of this article is to show how a narratological analysis of such a short piece of verse can contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics and interactions among the characters, as well as of the different communicative levels that emerge through the interplay of voices within the poem’s narrative discourse. Particular attention will be paid to the progression from Guðrún’s initial silence to her eventual speech, and to the role played by the female voices surrounding her in this process.

2. Narrative Framework and Voice in *Guðrúnarkviða I*

The poem portrays Guðrún Gjúkadóttir, its heroine, in a particularly dramatic situation: she is sitting beside her slain husband, Sigurðr, motionless and paralysed by grief, unable to express her sorrow through gestures, lamentation, or tears. Different men and women belonging to the court surround her, attempting to comfort her and make her weep. Yet she remains

unable to shed tears, even though her grief is so overwhelming that she is on the verge of dying from sorrow.

The poem has a clear and straightforward structure, with a plot that provides an overall framework and gives the narrative its dynamic movement. [7] Its main focus is the urgent need to help the motionless and voiceless Guðrún overcome her state of emotional paralysis and give expression to her grief [8].

I will first consider some features that point to an underlying narrative framework throughout the poem, both from a formal and stylistic perspective and in terms of its content.

2.1. The Narrative Framework

The scene is set in a distant and unspecified past, a temporal dimension reminiscent of the opening of a fairy tale. The Old Norse incipit *ár var*, “it was long ago”, is comparable to the familiar “once upon a time.” The setting gradually emerges as new, initially anonymous characters are introduced. Some are described as standing, while others are sitting around Guðrún. Their identification as *jarlar* (earls or noblemen) and their wives suggests an indoor setting, namely the court hall of an aristocratic dwelling. The final stanza (27) of the poem further supports this interpretation by mentioning an architectural feature, a pillar or column (*støð*).

A second indication can be found in the title preceding the poem in the manuscript, *Guðrúnarkviða*, which provides an important clue to its genre and content. The term *kviða*, specific to Old Norse-Icelandic literature, generally denotes a poetic text with a narrative component [3, 9].

Finally, the verse form employed in the poem is itself associated with narrative poetry. Known in Old Norse as *fornyrðislag*, literally “the metre of ancient words”, it is clearly distinct from other verse forms that occur predominantly in dialogical poems or in poems of gnomic, wisdom, or magical content [10].

2.2. A Narratological Perspective

The term *voice* has been employed by narratologists [11] to refer to the narrating instance and its participants within a given spatio-temporal framework. [5] Narrative communication can be understood as a locutionary act involving different communicative voices and levels. Narratology distinguishes among the narrator, who conveys the narrative discourse, the focalizer, through whose perspective the diegesis is presented, and the actors who perform the events within it. These roles may coincide, but they do not necessarily do so. [11] Narratology further distinguishes between extradiegetic voices, which operate outside the story they narrate, and intradiegetic voices, which belong to the narrative world. Narrators may also participate in the stories they recount: in Genette’s terms, such narrators are homodiegetic, whereas those who do not participate in the story are heterodiegetic. [12] These distinctions are particularly useful for analysing

Guðrúnarkviða I, where an extradiegetic narrative voice alternates with a series of intradiegetic voices that recount their own experiences and contribute to the unfolding of the narrative.

Earlier scholarship tended to approach *The First Lay of Guðrún* from a source-oriented perspective, treating it as a collection of distinct elements of different origins rather than as a coherent literary work. More recently, however, scholars such as G. E. Sigurðsson, Lars Lönroth, and Daniel Sävborg [7, 13, 14] have approached the poem as an integrated whole. Such approaches, however, do not necessarily account for the poem's overall narrative dynamics or communicative structure. A narratological analysis, by contrast, can be particularly useful for examining the relationship between the narrating voice and the other voices within the poem, as well as the different forms of discourse embedded within the initial narrative framework.

For the purposes of this study, questions concerning the disparate origins of the poem's various sections will be set aside, allowing the analysis to focus on the text as it appears in the *Codex Regius* manuscript.

A narratological approach may be particularly fruitful when analysing texts such as those preserved in the *Codex Regius* of the *Poetic Edda*. Direct discourse, as found in the dramatic dialogues and monologues of many Eddic poems, constitutes a form of mimesis in which the characters themselves, rather than an external narrator, utter language and convey narrative discourse. [5] Yet even apparently direct dialogue remains embedded within a larger narrative structure, in which the narrator's presence can be detected not only through changes of speaker but also through more extensive interventions. A narratological perspective can therefore contribute to a better understanding of the different types of narrative found in Eddic poetry, as well as of the relationship between narrative and non-narrative discourse within these texts. Indeed, not all of the verse in *The First Lay of Guðrún*, for instance, is narrative: some passages contain elements of lamentation and self-reflection. Yet these different forms of discourse are embedded within a narrative framework, [11] even when the transitions between them remain implicit.²

The narratological concepts outlined above will be applied to the analysis of the poem's shifting voices, with particular attention to the interaction between narrator, focalization, and character speech. This perspective makes it possible to examine how the distribution of narrative voice contributes to the construction of memory, identity, and female subjectivity.

3. From Silence to Speech: the Female Voices of the Lay

3.1. Guðrún's Silence and the Extradiegetic Narrator

At the beginning of the lay, the first voice we hear is that of an extradiegetic narrator, who focuses on the grieving Guðrún sitting beside Sigurð's corpse. The narrator describes the extraordinary circumstances of her silent, paralysed suffering, presenting us with the image of a heroic, motionless *Pietà* sitting beside Sigurð; Guðrún resembles a marble statue. The narrator draws particular attention to Guðrún's apparent involuntary silence. This voice is at once distant and involved: it provides the essential clues for establishing the context while presenting Guðrún in an almost theatrical manner. The opening stanza creates a striking visual tableau: the scene is highly pictorial in its composition. Its apparent stillness is significant from a narratological perspective: the poem begins by suspending its heroine between silence and action. Guðrún's initial silence is not merely the absence of speech, but a structural element in the poem's distribution of narrative voice.



Figure 1. Johannes Gehrts (1855-1921) *Guðrún an Sigurds Bahre* (*Guðrún at Sigurð's Deathbed*) 1888.

Woodcut by Eduard Ade, after an illustration by Johannes Gehrts. Published in Felix Dahn and Therese Dahn, Walhall: *Germanische Götter und Heldensagen für Alt und Jung am deutschen Herd erzählt*, 8th ed., Kreuznach: R. Voigtlander Verlag, 1888, Public domain

The visual quality of this opening scene is further illustrated

² Non-narrative discourse may also contain what Clunies Ross [5] calls a "narrative precipitate", that is, a condensation of narrative elements alluded to or evoked through one or more phrases, images, or metaphors. Identifying these condensed narrative elements is essential to a full understanding of the poem's dynamics. See,

for example, Brynhildr's statement *eld áiofri ormbæðs litom*, "we saw the fire of the serpent's bed shine on the prince", a kenning that alludes to Sigurð's acquisition of Fáfnir's treasure.

by a nineteenth-century woodcut depicting Guðrún mourning beside Sigurðr's corpse (Figure 1). Although produced several centuries after the medieval poem and therefore not a representation of the scene in any philological sense, the image closely recalls the stanza's central elements—Guðrún's stillness, her proximity to Sigurðr's body, and the atmosphere of silent mourning—while offering a striking example of the enduring cultural and artistic resonance of Eddic poetry across centuries of reception.

*Ár var þats Guðrún gærdiz at deyja,
er hon sat sorgfull yfir Sigurð;
gæðit hon hi úfra ne hōndom slá
ne kveina um sem konor a ðrar.* (stanza 1) [15]
It was long ago that Guðrún made ready to die,
when she sat sorrowful over Sigurð;
she did not weep, nor strike her hands,
nor lament as other women do.³

As remarked above, the first stanza of the poem provides the audience with temporal clues, situating the events described in a distant past through the expression *ár var*, “it was long ago”. At the same time, it establishes the mourning situation from the very beginning (*sat ... yfir Sigurði* “she sat ... over Sigurðr”) and provides a wealth of details about the expected behaviour of a wife in mourning. This is achieved through a series of negative statements that draw attention, precisely through their absence, to the gestures traditionally associated with mourning a dead husband.

In my view, the final half-line is open to a variety of interpretations. *Sem konor a ðrar*, “like other women (do)”: the narrator may be referring both to the expected ritual behaviour of a widow in public, in the presence of other mourners, and to Guðrún's exceptional status in comparison with other women. The expression thus also draws attention to the unique and profound relationship between Guðrún and Sigurðr.

3.2. The Female Chorus: Gjaflaug and Herborg

In the following stanzas, the poet achieves a striking narrative effect by contrasting the static initial image of a silent and motionless Guðrún with the arrival of the court women on the scene. The narrative action unfolds through the progressive disruption of this initial stillness. The narrator thus introduces a group of female characters who attempt to alleviate Guðrún's sorrow and encourage her to express her emotions openly by making her weep. [8] This ensemble of anonymous women, the wives of the earls, dressed in distinctive garments and adorned with precious jewels, sits near Guðrún. They are represented as a tragic chorus, participating in the action without being individually characterised. Their voices are indistinguishable, and they function as a single character. The narrator briefly alludes to their experiences of suffering and grief. Sorrow appears to be a common feature of these female characters, who seem able to process and make sense of past suffering primarily through lamentation and the recollection of painful

memories. Among these anonymous ladies of the court, two are singled out and named by the narrator. They are introduced through brief narrative references that do not interrupt the flow of the alliterative metre, since their names are incorporated into the stanzaic structure.

The first woman to step out of the shadows is Gjaflaug, Guðrún's aunt and her father's sister. She recounts her sorrowful life, marked by repeated bereavements and the loss of numerous relatives, including no fewer than five husbands. She concludes by emphasising the importance of continuing to live despite suffering:

*“Mic veit ec á moldo munar lausasta;
hefi ec fimm vera forspell beðit,
þriggia dætra þriggia systra,
átta brædra þó ec ein l fi.”* (stanza 4) [15]
“I know that in the world I am the most bereft of joy;
I have suffered the loss of five husbands,
of three daughters, three sisters,
of eight brothers, yet I alone live.”

Like Guðrún, Gjaflaug has experienced profound loss; unlike her, however, she has survived it and is able to give it narrative form. A similar pattern can be observed in Herborg's much longer account, which extends over five stanzas. Herborg, identified as queen of the Huns, recounts her cruel fate of suffering and bereavement: she lost many of her loved ones on the battlefield and several others in a shipwreck. She was left to prepare their bodies for burial, a task she had to perform alone, without anyone to comfort her. She was also taken captive and enslaved, forced to serve her master's wife, who repeatedly beat her.

Each of these female characters becomes a narrator, introducing an embedded narrative in which she is both protagonist and actor. The transition to these embedded narratives is marked by the alliterative, formulaic expression *þá qvað* (“then said...”), which introduces direct discourse as a form of mimesis, whereby the characters themselves, rather than the primary narrator, articulate their experiences. Because these narratives are delivered in alliterative metre, the succession of female voices takes on the form of a chant, thus reproducing the formal structure of the poem itself. [16] The use of the verb *kvað*, which may mean “said”, “composed”, or “intoned”, further reinforces the poetic potency of the utterance, allowing it to evoke simultaneously the acts of composing, reciting, and speaking.

The recital of each female speaker is interspersed with a three-line narrative refrain (*stef*) [17] stating that:

*Þeygi Guðrún gráta máti;
svávar hon móðug at mög dauðan
oc harðhuguðum hrer fylkis.* (stanza 5) [15]

Even so Guðrún could not weep;
she was so grief-stricken at the young man's death,
and so hard of heart at the fall of the prince.

The threefold intervention of the extradiegetic narrator

3 Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

(stanzas 2, 5, and 11) contributes to heightening the emotional suspense by juxtaposing the stories of private loss with Guðrún's continued silence and by sustaining the emphasis on unuttered and seemingly unutterable grief [16].

3.3. Gullrond and the Restoration of Guðrún's Voice

Through the intervention of Gullrond, Guðrún's sister and Gjúki's daughter—another female character who has not previously been introduced into the narrative—the death of the young hero is brought vividly into view, both for the audience and within the world of the poem. Gullrond comments on the other women's attempts to make Guðrún weep, particularly criticising Herborg for her inability to communicate effectively with a young wife. In a dramatic gesture, she unveils the dead man's body, exposing the harsh reality of his pierced chest and blood-soaked hair, his shining eyes open but lifeless. She compels Guðrún to look at him and kiss him:

Svipti hon blæio af Sigurð

oc vatt vengi fyr vifs kni á:

“L ftu á li úfan, legðu munn við grön,

sem du h dsa ðr heilan stilli.” (stanza 13) [15]

She lifted the shroud from Sigurð

and placed a cushion by the woman's knees.

“Look at your beloved, put your mouth to his moustache,
as you once embraced the prince when he was alive.”

Gullrond thus acts as a mediator of Guðrún's grief: she dramatically forces her young sister to look upon Sigurð's body and follow the customary rituals of mourning, while at the same time pushing her back into her conventional social role and making her conform to it. [18] At the same time, however, she is the only person who offers Guðrún explicit empathy and acknowledges the depth of her grief. She also acts as a spokesperson for the narrator, sharing the narrator's perspective on Guðrún's exceptional status and uniqueness. Like the other female characters, she delivers her words in the form of a chant. Yet hers is not a song of mourning; rather, it celebrates the profound love that bound Guðrún to Sigurð:

“Ycrar vissa ec ástir mestar

manna allra fyr mold ofan...” (stanza 17) [15]

“Yours I know was the greatest love

of all people upon the wide earth...”

Gullrond's role thus has a twofold effect: it frees Guðrún from her paralysis and gives her a voice. By forcing her to confront Sigurð's body and to participate in the customary rituals of mourning, Gullrond restores her to the social role expected of a grieving wife; at the same time, however, she enables Guðrún to articulate a grief that has until then remained unspoken. Her initiative therefore both reinscribes Guðrún within the conventional structures of female mourning and creates the conditions for her to express her own voice

and reveal the full extent of her despair. The significance of this intervention is further highlighted by a later comment from Guðrún's fierce rival, Brynhildr, who expresses her profound disapproval of Gullrond for having given Guðrún the faculty of speech—in other words, for having given her a voice. In typically Eddic fashion, this is expressed through the striking phrase *m ðr únar*, “runes of speech”.

4. Memory, Identity and Polyphony

4.1. Guðrún's Speech and the Reconstruction of Memory

The poem thus reaches its climax when Guðrún delivers a long lyrical speech filled with memories of Sigurð and his extraordinary appearance. This constitutes a particular form of eulogy, enriched by Nordic cultural details and by specifically female perspectives. [13, 14] Her speech encompasses her former status, her happy life with Sigurð, and her present loneliness, loss of position, and lack of protection. It culminates in her openly accusing her brothers of killing Sigurð and foretelling their impending disastrous fate. In the final stanza of her speech, Guðrún recalls the joy in the courtyard when Sigurð saddled his horse and then went to ask for Brynhildr's hand on Gunnarr's behalf. The memory is particularly poignant because she associates it with an ominous moment and with the malevolent figure of Brynhildr:

“Opt var ítúni teiti meiri,

þá er minn Sigurð sðladi Grana,

oc þeir Brynhildar bi ða fóro,

armrar vættar, illo heili.” (stanza 22) [15]

“Many times there was great merriment in the farmyard,
when my Sigurð saddled Grani,
and they went to woo Brynhildr,
the wretched woman, under an ill fate.”

The phrase *minn Sigurð* (“my Sigurð”) conveys the deeply personal and retrospective nature of Guðrún's voice, as her recollection of a happier past is inevitably coloured by the catastrophe that has already befallen her. Prompted by the sight of her beloved's wounded corpse and by her sister's solicitous and warm-hearted words, the heroine regains the ability to speak. She emerges from her state of spiritual and physical paralysis and, through speech, gradually regains her memory and identity. Yet the memory of the past, far from being a happy recollection, is sorrowful and despairing, as she confronts the tragic events impending upon her and the uncertainty and gloomy prospects of her status as a widow. The shift from silence to speech is therefore also a narratological shift: as Guðrún becomes the speaking subject of her own recollection, her voice assumes a central role in shaping the narrative representation of the past.

4.2. From Object of the Gaze to Speaking Subject

An ongoing interplay between aurality and visibility lies at the core of the poetic impact and emotional subtext of *The First Lay of Guðrún*. Initially, the audience's gaze is drawn to the complete immobility of the young Guðrún. Gullrönd's intervention then shifts the focus of the grieving widow, and consequently that of the audience, towards the face and body of the deceased hero, inviting Guðrún to look upon her dead husband. Through Guðrún's eyes, the audience is compelled to visualise the gruesome details of the wounded hero's body: the clotted blood in his hair, the wound in his chest, and his lifeless eyes. Once again, the narrator's voice describes the gradual transformation of Guðrún's body language: she falls to her knees, her hair comes loose, her face reddens, and finally she begins to weep. Guðrún's outburst of tears is accompanied by the cackling of geese in the courtyard, as if the surrounding world itself responded empathetically to her grief.

The poem thus moves Guðrún from silence to sound, from immobility to movement, and from being the object of the narrator's gaze to becoming an active speaking subject within the narrative.

4.3. Polyphony and Female Subjectivity

The stanzas alternate intermittently between an extradiegetic narrating voice and the voices of a community of women who sit with Guðrún, sharing their sorrows and supporting her in her grief, thereby prompting her to lament. Each woman recounts her own personal history of grief and loss. The recitation of female sorrows (*tregr q*) thus takes the form of a litany of past suffering, becoming itself part of the mourning process.

The poem creates a space in which female voices can be heard and in which the specifically female experience of loss and grief can be articulated. It envelops the audience in a shared history of female lamentation. These voices are distinct, yet they are united by a common theme: each woman gives voice to her own experience of suffering in an individual and autonomous way. Returning to the musical metaphor of the chant, this multivoicedness—through which the adversity of life and the complexity of human experience, particularly female experience, are brought to the fore—emerges as a kind of polyphonic composition that informs the poem as a whole. Although Mikhail Bakhtin [19] developed the concept of polyphony primarily in relation to the novel, it may be useful here as a heuristic framework for examining the interaction of different voices and perspectives in *Guðrúnarkviða I*. The poem's presentation of Guðrún's grief through her interaction with the other women may be read as displaying a certain degree of polyphony, insofar as different perspectives on grief are allowed to emerge and interact. The poem's polyphonic structure thus emerges not simply from the presence of multiple female voices, but from their different narrative functions

and their contribution to the reconstruction of Guðrún's experience.

As the narrator's voice does at the beginning of the poem, Guðrún's voice has the power to bring another character onto the stage: Brynhildr appears and turns her fury on Gullrönd. She blames her for giving Guðrún a voice and thereby enabling her to break free from her fatal paralysis—a state that might otherwise have led to her death. [8] Brynhildr attempts to reject Gullrönd's accusations and shift the blame onto her brother Atli. The audience is once again drawn into the performance and invited to pass judgement. Yet the narrator's description of Brynhildr's reaction to the sight of Sigurðr's wounds makes the narrator's sympathy for Guðrún unmistakable.

5. Conclusions

From a narratological perspective, *Guðrúnarkviða I* can be read as a carefully structured progression from narrated silence to articulated speech. The poem's opening establishes Guðrún primarily as the object of an extradiegetic narrator's gaze: she is seen, described, and interpreted, but she does not yet speak. Her silence and immobility suspend the narrative action and create a temporary state of narrative stasis. The first stanza therefore does more than introduce the circumstances of Sigurðr's death; it establishes a particular distribution of narrative agency in which Guðrún is initially deprived of both voice and control over the representation of her own experience.

The subsequent intervention of the female mourners progressively alters this narrative configuration. With the formula *bá kvað*, the poem repeatedly shifts from extradiegetic narration to direct discourse, allowing the women to become temporary narrators of their own experiences. Their embedded narratives interrupt the linear progression of the main story and create a series of secondary narrative levels within the lay. Gjaflaug and Herborg are thus not merely characters who comment on Guðrún's grief: they become narrating subjects, temporarily appropriating the narrative voice in order to recount their own histories of suffering. The repeated alternation between their speeches and the narrator's refrain concerning Guðrún's continuing inability to weep produces a distinctive narrative rhythm, in which the progression of speech is constantly juxtaposed with the persistence of silence.

This structure also creates a gradual redistribution of narrative authority. At first, the extradiegetic narrator controls both the representation of Guðrún and the interpretation of her emotional condition. The female characters then acquire a more active narrative function by recounting experiences from their own perspectives. Gullrönd's intervention marks a further shift: she does not merely speak about Guðrún but actively changes the conditions under which Guðrún can become a speaker herself. By unveiling Sigurðr's body and directing Guðrún's gaze towards it, Gullrönd initiates the transition from externally narrated experience to self-articulated

experience.

Guðrún's long speech consequently represents the culmination of this narratological progression. Once she begins to speak, the centre of narrative authority moves from the extradiegetic narrator to the protagonist herself. Her discourse retrospectively reorganises the events that have preceded it, transforming remembered episodes into a subjective narrative of loss. The past is no longer presented exclusively from an external perspective but reconstructed through Guðrún's own memory. Her speech therefore introduces a new focal position: the events of the past are filtered through the consciousness of the woman who has survived them and who now possesses the narrative authority to interpret their meaning.

The relationship between focalisation and voice is particularly significant here. At the beginning of the poem, Guðrún is the object of the narrator's observation; later, she becomes the focalising consciousness through which Sigurð's body, their former happiness, and the catastrophe itself are reconstructed. The movement from being seen to seeing, and finally to speaking, corresponds to a progressive acquisition of narrative agency.

The female voices surrounding Guðrún contribute decisively to this transformation. Their narratives constitute a form of embedded storytelling that temporarily suspends the main narrative in order to foreground alternative experiences of loss. From a narratological standpoint, their function is therefore both structural and thematic: they interrupt the narrative present, introduce multiple temporal perspectives, and establish a network of female voices through which Guðrún's own story can eventually emerge. Their speeches may consequently be understood as a narrative preparation for Guðrún's intervention, creating the discursive space that allows the protagonist to move from silence into self-narration.

The final appearance of Brynhildr further confirms the importance of this redistribution of narrative agency. Once Guðrún has acquired a voice, Brynhildr responds to and contests her version of events. The narrative therefore becomes increasingly dialogic: competing voices interpret the same catastrophe, assign responsibility, and attempt to control its meaning. The poem does not ultimately resolve these competing perspectives through a single authoritative interpretation. Instead, it stages the production of meaning through the interaction of multiple voices, with the extradiegetic narrator remaining present as a framing and mediating instance.

The narratological structure of *Guðrúnarkviða I* can therefore be understood as a movement through successive positions of narrative agency: Guðrún is first observed, then surrounded by speakers, subsequently addressed and prompted to respond, and finally becomes the principal speaker and interpreter of her own experience. The transition from silence to speech is consequently also a transition between different narrative functions and levels of discourse. What begins as an externally narrated tableau of grief develops into a multivocal narrative in which female characters progressively assume the authority to recount, interpret, and contest experience.

Seen in this light, the poem's representation of grief is inseparable from its narrative form. Silence functions as narrative suspension; the women's laments introduce embedded narratives; Gullrönd triggers a shift in focalisation; and Guðrún's speech ultimately re-centres the narrative around the consciousness of the bereaved woman herself. The movement from silence to speech is therefore not merely the psychological recovery of a grieving heroine, but a narratological process through which voice, focalisation, temporal perspective, and narrative agency are progressively transferred to Guðrún. The poem's formal structure thus enacts the very transformation that it narrates: the woman who initially exists as the object of the story ultimately becomes one of its most powerful narrating subjects.

Author Contributions

Concetta Sipione: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Biography



Concetta Sipione is a permanent researcher in Germanic Philology at the Department of Humanities, University of Catania, where she teaches Germanic Philology and Medieval Germanic Literatures in undergraduate and graduate programmes. She holds a PhD in Germanic and Nordic Philology from the University of Florence, where she completed a dissertation on the *Virginal* of the Dresden Heldenbuch. She has undertaken periods of study and research in Germany and Austria. Her research focuses on medieval Germanic languages and literatures, with particular attention to Germanic heroic and legendary traditions, medieval narrative, reception and intertextuality, gender and female voices, otherness, and the relationship between language, power, and identity. She is a member of the Italian Association of Germanic Philology and of the Interdisciplinary Centre for Gender Studies (Genus) at the University of Catania.

Research Field

Concetta Sipione: - Germanic and Old Norse Heroic and Legendary Traditions, - Language, Power, and Identity in Medieval Germanic Texts, - Gender and Female Voices in Medieval Germanic and Old Norse Literature, - Reception, Intertextuality, and Cultural Memory, - Comparative Germanic Perspectives