Semantic Shift of *Can* and *May* in Middle English

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0 . Introduction

The auxiliary verb *can* whose original function was a main verb shared its meaning of 'intellectual power' translated as 'to know how to' with other verbs such as *witan* or *cnawan*. The development of these three verbs is well explained by Ono (1975. pp. 34ff)

> ⋯Kunnan (can) developed later than *witan* in West Germanic. We can see this clearly in the history of English, in which *witan* became obsolete while *cunnan* has shown a remarkable development as an auxiliary verb (can). The obsolescence of one of the chief verbs meaning 'to know' and the development as an auxiliary of the other left a gap in the field of meaning. *Cnawan* (know) may be said to have developed to fill the gap.

The grammatical change of *can* from a main verb to an auxiliary has a connection with its meaning development.

On the other hand, *may* has developed its use as an auxiliary in the earlier stage. This means that its grammatical change has not caused as much change in meaning as *can* has. One of the reasons which has weakened the original meaning of *may*, 'to have the physical power' is attributed to the development of *can* for this meaning. When *may* means 'to have physical power to' it is well contrasted with *can* as 'to have intellectual power to' in

OE Chron. (1137) I ne *can* ne i ne *mai* tellen alle þe
wunder ne alle þe pines. 'I have neither the intellectual
nor the physical capacity to tell all the wonders or all
the tortures'.

we preien yow and biseke yow as mekely as we *konne*
(='know how to') and *mowen* (='are able to') (c1386 Ch.,
CT B2933)

Nevertheless, the juxtaposition of *can* and *may* has not been used to
impress the meaning difference when *may* has been replaced by *can*
in this sense. The meaning of the two has been gradually assimi-
lated. The adjacent use of *can* and *may* at this point does not show
the contrast but is an expression "dwindled down to a stereotyped
formula . . . so frequently found in earlier writers of 'elegant' English,
such as 'foul and filthy', . . . 'happiness and bliss.'"[1] In the following
example, there seems to be no distinctive difference between *can* and
may, guessing from the feature of 'remember.'

Who *can* or *may* remembre . . . (c1439 Lydgate, Fall Pr.
I, 1432 (Visser § 1657))

While *may* is losing one meaning on one hand, it has gained other
meanings such as 'permission,' 'possibility,' 'eventuality' etc., on the
other hand.[2]

The aim of this study is to trace the semantic shift of the two
auxiliaries, *can* and *may* in Middle English period. The organization
of the study will be as follows : In Chapter 1, the wider range of the
meanings of *can* and *may* in ME is overviewed according to Traugott
(1965 & 1972), Visser (1963–1973) and *MED*. The meanings which
are classified in the above mentioned works are applied to the
semantic study of *can* and *may* in *Ancrene Wisse* (*A. W.* henceforth).

Then in the succeeding chapter, the meanings of every *can* and *may* in *A. W.* are carefully examined in the hope of showing the semantic shift of *can* and *may* in the literary work of the earlier history of the English language and also to trace back the occurrence of the same meaning in *can* and *may* in *A. W.*

1 . Semantic Overview of Can and May in ME

1 . 1 *Can*

In studying the meaning of *can* in the ME period, the classification by Traugott, Visser and *MED* will be adopted to make a closer semantic observation of *can.*

The meanings of *can* which are found in common by Traugott, Visser and *MED* are 'intellectual power,' and 'capacity'. In 'intellectual power,' *can* maintains the original meaning 'to know how to.' 'Capacity' was originally expressed by *may*, and *can* denoting 'capacity' was in use later than 'to know how to.' There seems to be a certain period of time in which these two verbs shared the meaning of 'capacity'. It is in ME that this coexistence can be found as the above mentioned scholars, as well as others, have found. This will be shown later in more detail.

When *can* is used as a main verb, it seems more likely to denote 'to know (how to)' as in

> To telle how ther is such a man, Which ... *can* Al that a good man scholde *kunne*. 'I will tell you how there is such a man that knows everything that a good man should know.' (a1390 Gower CA 5, 2909)

> Of remedies of love she knew per chaunce, For she *koude* of that art the olde daunce. 'She knew of remedies of love by luck, for she knew of the art, all the tricks of love'. (c1386 Ch., CT A476)

In some sentences, however, the difference is not clear. Visser writes

> Since ... the transition of *can* expressing 'to know how to' to *can* expressing 'capacity' is an extremely subtle process, ... (§ 1623)

In the following sentence, the meaning seems to be ambiguous and can be translated either 'knew how to' or 'was able to.'

> Wel *koude* he sitte on hors and faire ryde. 'He knew how to (or was able to) sit on the horse and ride well.' (c1386 Ch., CT A94)

There is a description of *can* denoting 'possibility' in *MED* which is also adopted by Visser.

> We olde men ... Til we be roten *kan* we noght be rype. 'It is not possible for us old men to be mature till we are rotten.' (c1386 Ch., CT A3875)

According to Visser, when *can* expressing 'possibility' is used in rhetorical questions, it is blended with emotions of diffidence, doubt, or uncertainty. This is exemplified in

> Who *koude* telle, but he hadde wedded be, The joye ... That is betwixe an housbonde and his wyf? 'Who could tell but one who had been married, what exists between a husband and wife?' (c1386 Ch., CT F803)

'Possibility' is emphasized in the following example.

> Wel *koude* he knowe a draughte of Londoun ale. 'He

was an expert judge of London ale.' (c1386 Ch., CT A382)[3]

To the above mentioned meanings, Visser adds the 'redundant' use of *can* when it is collocated with verbs of perception. According to him, *can* in the following sentence would hardly express power, capability or the like

in his owene (eye) he *kan* noght seen a balke. 'He does not see a beam in his own eye.' (c1386 Ch., CT A3920)

but would be distinguished from *can* in 'He has been blind (deaf) a long time, but now he can see again.' However, as Visser writes himself later, "It is difficult to say what exactly the difference is between 'I smell' and 'I can smell (the incense)'." (§ 1626)

Traugott classifies the meanings of *can* into 'intellectual power,' and 'capability.' The meanings of 'possibility' and 'redundancy' are added by Visser with the meaning of 'redundancy' uncertain. The principal meanings of *can* in *MED* are 'intellectual power,' 'capacity' and 'possibility.' Though Traugott misses 'possibility,' it is certainly found in Chaucer as shown by the examples on the previous page. The meaning of 'redundancy' suggested by Visser will be excluded from the present discussion because of its uncertainty in use.

Thus, as far as the present study is concerned, the meanings of *can* in ME will be limited to A) intellectual power, B) capacity and C) possibility.

1 . 2 *May*

In studying the meaning of *may* in the ME period, the classification of Traugott, Visser and *MED* will be applied. The multitudinous examples shown both in *MED* and Visser can be categorized into those showing the meanings of 'physical power," capacity,'

'possibility,' 'permission,' 'futurity,' 'obligation' and 'empty use.'
The meaning of 'physical power' is expressed in

> The kyte is ... a brid *þat may* wel with trauaile.　'The
> kite is a bird which can endure toil.' (a1398 Trev. Barth.
> 149 b/a)

This meaning which was contrasted with 'intellectual power' of *can*
in earlier stages has become comparable to the meaning of 'capacity'
as in

> Now artow Sathanas, that *mayst* nat twynne Out of
> miserie.　'Now are you Satan, who cannot depart from
> misery ?' (c1386 Ch., CT B3195)

and a juxtaposition of *can* and *may* in the following example seems
to mean 'capacity.'

> Old age for the conseil serveth, And lusti youthe his
> thonk deserveth Upon the travail which he doth ... That
> on *can*, and that other *mai*.　'The old people deserve the
> advice, and pleasant young people should be grateful for
> the toil he does ... what one can and what the other can.'
> (a1390 Gower, CA 7, 4144)

The meaning of 'possibility' is expressed when the meaning of
'capacity' is weakened.

> Ther *maistow* seen deuysynge of harneys So vnkouth
> and so riche and wroght so weel.　'There you may
> possibly see an arrangement of harness which is mar-
> velous, beautiful and well-wrought.' (c1386 Ch., CT
> A2496)

May used with words such as *hope, afraid, wonder, doubt*, etc., in-
volves the meaning of 'possibility' tinged with uncertainty. An
example with *hope* will be shown.

> in *hope* ... þat þei *may* vnderstonden hire speche & to
> leden hem in to cristendom. 'in hope ... that they may
> understand their speech and lead them to Christendom.'
> (c1400 Mandev. 178, 2)

May has taken the place of *motan* in the sense of 'permission' in
the Middle English period

> Ye *mowe* for me right as yow liketh do. 'You may do
> for me just as you like.' (c1386 Ch., CT E1554)

and when it is collocated with *well*, 'reasonableness' is expressed.

> Men ... *wel* it calle *may* The daisie, or elles the ye of
> day. 'It is reasonable that men call it daisy or else the
> eye of day.' (c1385 Ch., LGW 183)

The meaning of 'futurity', resembling *will, shall, would* or *should*,
is used with vestiges of the older sense of *mouen*, according to *MED*.
Examples in *MED* show that *may* has been used with this meaning
throughout the Middle English period.

> So *mow* ye witen wel forthi That for the time slep I
> hate. 'So you will know very well that I hate sleep for
> the time being.' (a1390 Gower, CA 4, 2788)

May was also used to mean 'obligation.'

> Withouten doute, it *may* stonden so. 'Without doubt, it
> must be so.' (c1386 Ch., CT A1322)

Finally, *MED* exemplifies the use of *may* which is semantically empty like *may ben* (=is (are)), *mighte sen* (=saw) or *may menen* (= mean).

> It is nat honeste, it *may* nat auaunce For to deelen with
> no swuch poraille. 'It is not honourable, it is not pro-
> fitable to have dealings with such poor people.' (c1386
> Ch., CT A246)

These are the meanings of *may* chosen from *MED* and Visser. Traugott's classification differs from them. She ascribes the mean-ings of 'physical power,' 'capacity' and 'permission' to the meanings of *may*. 'Eventuality' which she named belongs to the group of 'possibility.'[4] In addition, her classification involves the meaning of 'wish.' *MED* expresses this meaning in the sense of 'possibility' since the element of wish is tinged with the possibility of realization. Visser, however, views that *may* denoting 'wish' was rare in use before the beginning of the sixteenth century. (§ 1680) Instead of *may*, the subjunctive mood, which can be found as in 'Thy kingdom *come*,' was prevalent in ME.

Therefore, the principal meanings of *may* in ME will be classified into A) physical power, B) capacity, C) possibility, D) permission, E) futurity and F) obligation.

2. Semantic Study of Can and May in *A. W.*[5]

2.1 *Can*

In the semantic study of *can* in *A. W.*, its syntactical functions have to be accounted for. In the text 23 occurrences out of 42 are grouped into an auxiliary (AUX) and the rest into a main verb (MV)[6].

Can in *A. W.* can be distributed into two groups with the meaning distribution found in Chapter 1. The semantic distribution

by grammatical functions is illustrated as follows :

Table 1   Meaning Distribution of *Can*

A intellectual power	B capacity	C possibility
+	+	—

Table 2   Occurrences

A		B		Total
AUX	MV	AUX	MV	
5	19	18	0	
24		18		42

Total occurrences of *can* as AUX are distributed into two groups.   *Can* in object-taking construction (MV) can be put into Group A.   The original meaning of *can* as 'intellectual power' is maintained in the structure of *can* +NP.   Of the 23 examples in which *can* functions as an auxiliary, 5 examples are put into this group from the context.   The remaining examples of this kind are put into Group B.   There is no example of *can* in Group C.

Now, examples of each group will be shown.

A. Intellectual Power

When *can* is combined with NP, the meaning is 'to know' as in[7]

ant hwa se ne *con peos fif ureisuns* ; segge eauer an.   'If anyone does not know these five prayers, let her say the same one all the time.' (9a/24)

ʒe ancres ahen *þ*is leaste stucche reden to ower wummen euche wike eanes. a*þ*et ha *hit cunnen*. 'You anchoresses ought to read this last part to your women once each week until they know it.' (116 b/18)

Can in a phrase of *can thank* means 'express or show.'

nalde he *cunne* god *þonc* a mon *þe* duste uppon him of peonehes a bigurdel forte reimin him wi ð & lesen him of pine. 'would he not express thanks to anyone who threw a bag of money at him, with which he could settle the debt and set himself free from suffering?' (34 a/20)

*þ*ah godd ne *cunne* him neauer *þonc* of his sonde. 'even though God does not express thanks to him for his messenger.' (34 b/14)

wac crist ure euchan to segil wardein bereð to lutel menske. & *kunnen* him to lutel *þonc* of his seruise. 'Christ knows, everyone of us pays too little honour to so noble a guardian and shows him too little gratitude for his service.' (85 a/21)

In the following example, *can* is used in the form of imperative with 'remember' as a suitable translation.

Aʒein misdede oðer missahe ; lo her on ende *þe* beste remedie. & *cunneð þ*is essample. 'Here, finally, is the best remedy against slander or injury ; remember this example.' (34 a/16)

Can construed with ϕ-Inf in the 'intellectual power' meaning can be translated 'to know how to' as in

wisdom *þ* ich *cunne don.* luue *þ* ich wulle don aa *þ* te is leouest. 'wisdom that I know how to act, love that I may desire to perform always what is most pleasing to Thee.' (7 a/7)

Summe iuglurs beoð *þe* ne *cunnen seruin* of nan oþer gleo bute makien cheres. 'There are some jesters who do not know how to perform any other amusement but that of making faces.' (57 a/15)

for na *þ*ing ne *con luuien* riht ; bute he ane. 'for there is no being which knows how to love truly except God alone.' (110 b/2)

Nu *con þes luuien þe þ*us spekeð & *þ*us deð to alle *þe* him inwardliche leueð & luuieð. 'Now, does He know how to love who speaks in this way and acts in this way to all who truly believe in Him and love Him ?' (110 b/ 25)

Though *φ*-Inf is deleted in the next example, the same translation of 'to lnow how to' can be applied.

Hwa se seið as he *con.* & deð al *þ* he mei ; 'Whoever says what he knows how to say and does all that he can do,' (90 a/24)

B. Capacity

At first, examples of *can* construed with *φ*-Inf are shown.[8]

*þ*e ... *con* swaliches *don* hit. 'who ... can do it in such a way,' (69 b/23)

& he walde fein mare ʒef he *cuðe seggen.* 'and he would have been willing to say more if he had been able to say.'

(86 a/14)

In the following examples, the subject of *can* is not human. This might be a good indication of the semantic evolution of *can*, since the original meaning of 'intellectual power' is more likely to be given to a human subject. *Can* with a non-human subject gives a hint of the expansion of semantic shift.[9]

> *Pe hen* hwen ha haueð ileid ; ne *con* bute cakelin. 'The hen, when it has laid, can do nothing but cackle.' (16 a/ 19)

> *Pe chaliz* ... walde he ʒef he *cuðe* speoken ; awearien his cleansing fur. & his wruhte honden. 'The chalice ... would, if it could speak, curse its cleansing fire and the hands of its maker ?' (77 b/22)

Next, two sentences with *can* + deleted φ-Inf are shown.[10]

> Segge ... Aleast oremus hwa se *con.* 'Say ... lastly oremus whoever can.' (12 a/6)

> segge fiftene o *þ*is ilke wise ... hwa se *con.* 'say fifteen in the same manner ... whoever can.' (12 a/8)

It is not always easy to distinguish Group A from Group B. Some of the examples could possibly be put into the other group. However, the difficulty seems to be brought about by the subtlety of a change from meaning x to meaning y. From this point of view, the difficulty in determining the meaning of *can* here might also be attributed to the stage itself on which the meaning change had been in process.

2 . 2 .   *May*

Since no grammatical function of *may* as an auxiliary was found in *A. W.*, there is no need to study the meaning of *may* from a syntactical point of view.   The adaptation of *may* in *A. W.* to the meanings of *may* in ME found in Chapter 1 is as follows:

Table 3   Meaning Distribution of *May*

A	B	C	D	E	F
+	+	+	+	+	+

A. physical power   B. capacity   C. possibility
E. permission   E. futurity   F. obligation

Table 4   Occurrences

A	B	C	D	E	F	Total
9	149	150	32	5	5	350

The meanings of *may* in *A. W.* show a wider variety than those of *can*.   They are distributed into six different meanings.   The occurrence of Group A, the original meaning of *may*, is found in fewer examples compared with the high frequency of groups B and C.   The chief manifestation of the meaning *may* is shared by these two with occurrences nearly equal.   The second highest frequency is Group D. Frequent use of this meaning is admissible, when it is taken into account that the text concerns 'rules for nuns' with many things 'allowed' or 'not allowed'.   These three groups B, C and D occupy 94% of the whole occurrences.   Group E is used 5 times "with vestige of the older sense of *mouen*" (*MED*).   The occurrence of Group F is equal to that of Group E.

Now, examples of each group will be shown.

A. Physical Power

When *may* is used intransitively, the meaning of 'physical power' is likely to be expressed.　Since there was not found an example of *may* as a main verb in *A. W.*, it is difficult to distinguish this meaning from 'capacity' in the construction of *may* + ϕ-Inf or *may* + deleted ϕ-Inf.　The meaning of 'physical power' seems to be described in the combination of *may* with *can* as in

> mihte *þ* ich *mahe* don. wisdom *þ* ich *cunne* don.
> 'strength that I can act, wisdom that I know how to act,'
> (7 a/6)

> *Þ*e ne *con* o*þ*er uhtsong oðer ne *mei* hit seggen ; 'If anyone does not know Matins or cannot say them,' (12 a/4)

> tu seli ancre *þe* art his leoue spuse leorne hit ʒeorne of him *þ* tu hit *cunne* & *mahe* soðliche seggen.　'O you happy anchoress, who are His dear spouse, learn it from Him gladly until you know it and can say it with truth.' (30 a/5)

> *þe mei* don *þe* amendement.　& *con* swaliches don hit.
> 'who can put it right and know how to do it in such a way.' (69 b/22)

It is from the context that the meaning of 'physical power' was attached to *may* in the following sentences.

> Hwa se *mei* stonden al on ure leafdi wurðschipe ; stonde o godes halue.　'Whoever can stand all in our Lady's worship ; stand in God's behalf.' (6 a/16)

þ ower feble tendre flesch heardes ne *mei* þolien. 'because your weak and tender flesh cannot bear harsh garments.' (29 b/12)

In us nis nawt deorewurðe lauerd swa muchel strengðe. þ we *mahen* wiðstonden þe deofles ferd. 'In us, dear Lord, there is not enough strength with which we can withstand the force of the devil.' (72 b/9)

swa þ tu ne *mahe* nawt reculin him aʒeinward for þi muchele unstrengðe. 'so that you cannot drive him back bebause of your great weakness.' (80 a/16)

þ tu bi þin tale wiðstonde ne *mahtest.* 'by your account, you could not resist.' (82 b/24)

In these examples, the collocated verbs such as *stonden, þolien, widstonden* and *reculin,* more or less, require physical power.

B. Capacity

May used to express 'capacity' was found in abundance.

for nowðer ne *mei* þe wind. þ is þ word þ me seið. 'For neither can the wind, that is, the word that people say,' (34 a/8)

Ant nis ich wene namon þe ne *mei* understonden him of his sunne 'and I do not think there is any man who cannot recognize a particular sin of his own.' (56 b/21)

May in the following examples has 'future' meaning, while *might* has 'present' and 'future' meaning.

P ha ne *mei* iseo godd mid gastelich sihðe. 'so that she

will be able to see God with the eyes of her spirit,' (24 a/
7)

*P*is sihðe leoue sustren schal frourin ow marepen *mahte*
ei worltilich sihðe.　'This sight, dear sisters, shall be of
more comfort to you than could any worldly sight.' (24
a/27)

May with implied verbs of motion also means 'capacity.'[11]

hwen me punt hit; & stoppeð hit biuore wel *þ* hit ne
mahe duneward 'when it (water) has been firmly stopped
and dammed so that it cannot flow downwards' (18 a/25)

he is as *þe* burh wið ute wal *þ* ferde *mei in ouer al*.　'he
is like a city without a wall, into which an army can
enter from all sides.' (18 b/12)

þ he ne *mahte hider ne þider* ten dahes fulle.　'so that
for fully ten days he could not move this way or that.' (66
a/17)

Buh *þe* he seið duneward *þ* ich *mahe ouer þe*.　'Bow
down, that we can go over.' (73 a/2)

C. Possibility

The weakening of the meaning 'to be able to' to 'perhaps be able
to' has brought to the use of *may* in the sense of 'possibility.'　In this
transition of meaning, there is a certain period of time in which it is
difficult to distinguish the first meaning from the second one.　Thus,
confusion in ascertaining the meaning of 'possibility' from 'capacity'
regarding *may* cannot be avoided.　Therefore, some of the examples
which were put into this group might possibly be placed in Group B.

Ah alle ne *mahe* nawt halden a riwle. 'But it is not possible for all to follow one rule.' (2 a/1)

ah his temptatiun *þe* ne *mahte* sunegin; wes ane wið uten. 'but this tempting of Him who could not sin was only from without.' (48 a/20)

In rhetorical questions, the meaning of 'probability' is much stressed.

wið uten hope of utcume & heorte ne *mei* bersten? 'without hope of escape, may hearts not break?' (20 b/8)

Mei moder ... for ʒeoten hire child? 'Can a mother ... forget her child?' (107 a/17)

In an idiomatic phrase such as

Mi feader ʒ*ef hit mei beon*; speare me ed tis time. 'My Father, if it is possible, spare Me now.' (99 a/9)

the meaning of 'possibility' would be applied.

In addition to the above, there is a use of *may* in the subjunctive mood. *May* in this use is often connected with such verbs as *wish*, *dread* or in indirect narrative clauses.

& *dredde þ* him a swuch *mahte* bitiden. 'and felt afraid that the like might happen to him.' (76 a/11)

& bit me ofte teachen him sumhwet wið hwet he *mahte* his licome deruen. 'and (he) often asks me to teach him (something) with which he might mortify his body.' (103 b/13)

Besides the seven sentences shown above, there are a great number of examples meaning 'possibility.'[12]

D. Permission

May to mean 'permission' can be traced back to its original meaning 'physical power.'　Traugott writes,

> From the sense 'have the physical power to' there developed in ME the weaker sense 'there are no conditions to prevent x ; ... which leads to mean 'permission'. (1972. p. 118)

In *A. W.* the use of the meaning 'permission' surpasses the meaning of 'physical power' in number.　This may easily be understood since *A. W.* was a book of nun's rules.　Some examples are shown among the 32 occurrences.[13]

> ʒe *mahen* ʒef ʒe wulleð seggen ower pater nostres. 'You may, if you wished to say your paternosters' (6 b/27)

> ha *mei* ec hopien þ ha schal singen þurh hire silence sweteliche in heouene. 'she may hope, too, to sing sweetly in heaven because of her silence.' (20 a/19)

> Þa he meande him ofþurst ; weater ne *mahte* he habben. 'When He complained of thirst, He was not allowed to have any water.' (71 a/12)

> ʒef ha hit ne bihat nawt ; ha hit *mei* do þah & leauen hwen ha wel wule.　'If she does not make a promise of it, she may nevertheless carry it out and cease whenever she wants to.' (2 b/1)[14]

E. Futurity

May used in the sense resembling that of *shall, will, should* and *would*, meaning 'futurity', is found in the following five examples.

> to eiðer limpeð his dale as ȝe *mahen* iheren. 'to each belongs its part, as you will hear.' (3 a/16)

> Al swa as ȝe *mahe* seon weater hwen me punt hit ; 'Just as you may see water, when one has stopped it.' (18 a/24)

> *P*eos i *p*ulli nest *mahen* habben uuel rest hwen ha ham wel bi*p*encheð. 'Those will have evil rest in the same nest when they think well of themselves.' (36 b/27)

> *P*e liun schal greden he seið. hwa ne *mei* beon offearet ? 'The lion shall roar, he said, who will not be afraid ?' (83 a/12)

> *þ* euch mon wið wisdom weie hwet he *mahe* don. 'so that everyone should weigh with wisdom what he will do.' (100 b/22)

The first two examples were the use in narratives with 'futurity' indistinctly expressed.

F. Obligation

May denoting 'obligation' was in the same use as *ohen* and *shulen* in the ME period. The use of *may* in combination with *ahen* in the following example seems to stress the meaning of 'obligation.'

> *þ* is alle *mahen & ahen* halden a riwle . . . 'so that all are obliged to keep one rule . . .' (1 b/19)

The other examples are :

firsi hire from þe world elles ha *mei* longe ʒeiʒen : 'let
her set herself from the world, or else she must cry out
for a long time' (19 a/26)

for wiðdrahe he his hond ; þu *maht* þrefter lokin.　'for
if He should withdraw His hand, you must look for it.'
(92 a/6)

Amites & parures. worldliche leafdis *mahen* inoh
wurchen.　'Ladies of the world should make enough of
amices and collar-bands.' (114 b/2)

In the following sentence, the meaning of may carries the idea of
'reasonableness.'

bliðe *mahe* ʒe beon þrof.　'you have reason to be glad of
it.' (94 a/18)

3 . Conclusions

　　The meanings decided upon for *can* are A) intellectual power, B)
capacity and C) possibility.　The use of *can* in *A. W.* is limited as
follows :
　　　　1 . *Can* in the sense of A above in 24 examples.
　　　　2 . *Can* in the sense of B above in 18 examples.
　　　　3 . *Can* in the sense of C above is not found.
　　　　4 . All examples of *can* as MV are used in the sense of
　　　　　　A, while examples of *can* as AUX are used in the
　　　　　　same sense of both A and B.
From this fact, it can be said that *can* as MV retains the original
meaning 'intellectual power,' and *can* as AUX retains it on the one
hand while it means 'capacity' on the other.　However, the use of the
latter is more frequent.

The meanings decided upon for *may* are A) physical power, B) capacity, C) possibility, D) permission, E) futurity and F) obligation. The use of *may* in *A. W.* is as follows :

1 . *May* is found in all the groups above.
2 . Group B (149 examples) and Group C (150 examples) are the chief meanings of *may*.
3 . The use of *may* in the sense of Group D is relatively high (32 examples).
4 . Groups A, E and F are minor in use.

From the above results, it can be said that the original sense of *may* was declining in use. Instead, the chief manifestations of *may* were changing to the sense of 'capacity,' 'possibility' and 'permission.'

The study of the meanings of *can* and *may* in *A. W.* shows that both *can* and *may* overlap in the sense of 'capacity' meaning 'to be able to.' 'Possibility' is supposed to be expressed by *can* and *may* in the Middle English period. However, *may* in that sense is not found in *A. W.*

Notes

1. Visser, § 1657.
2. The illustration by Visser (§ 1663) clearly shows the shift of meanings in *can* and *may*. ·
3. Translation of this line is from Winny, J. (1965) *The General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*, Cambridge, p. 104.
4. "In the course of the Middle English period this *may* (*may* in the sense of 'possibility') tends to assume a connotation of eventuality." (Visser, § 1654)
5. The text used here is *Ancrene Wisse Corpus Christi College MS.* (EETS 249. 1962) edited by J. R. R. Tolkien.
6. See *Hokusei Ronshyu*, Vol. 20, 1982. The author's observation of *can* and *may* in their syntax is

	AUX		MV	
	$+\phi$-Inf	$+\begin{array}{c}\text{deleted}\\\phi\text{-Inf}\end{array}$	$+$NP	$+$AUX
Can	$+$	$+$	$+$	$+$
May	$+$	$+$	$-$	$-$

7. The rest of the examples of this type are (5a/24), (10b/22), (12a/3), (15b/26), (16a/15), (30a/5), (62a/27), (76b/6), (76b/13), (76b/13), (76b/17), (115b/9) and (116a/25).

8. The rest of the examples of this type are (15b/27), (18a/18), (34b/15), (86a/11) and (91b/24).

9. "The alternation of *koun* with *mow* seems to derive from the use of *koun* with non-human subjects ..." Traugott (1972. p. 171)

10. The rest of the examples of this type are (7a/20), (8b/26), (16a/17), (55b/12), (72b/11), (107b/1) and (108a/17).

11. The rest of the examples of this meaning are (2a/8), (2a/8), (6a/3), (6a/4), (8b/27), (11b/3), (11b/16), (12a/2), (12b/22), (13b/5), (15a/19), (16a/28), (17a/3), (17a/15), (17b/12), (19b/17), (20a/8), (22b/28), (24b/25), (27a/20), (28b/3), (28b/6), (31a/17), (32b/9), (32b/12), (32b/22), (33b/2), (33b/10), (33b/15), (34a/12), (35a/10), (35a/20), (35b/1), (37a/27), (41a/23), (42b/28), (43a/26), (43b/23), (44a/3), (44b/19), (45a/26), (46a/14), (48a/13), (48a/15), (48a/16), (48b/21), (49a/26), (50a/4), (50a/5), (50b/13), (51b/28), (52b/10), (52b/27), (53a/4), (54a/25), (54b/24), (54b/27), (55a/4), (56a/22), (56b/7), (56b/19), (57a/19), (58b/1), (59a/15), (60a/23), (60b/2), (62a/10), (62a/20), (62b/2), (63a/6), (64b/1), (67a/11), (67a/20), (70a/2), (70b/18), (70b/28), (72b/12), (73b/8), (73b/23), (74b/22), (75b/6), (75b/16), (76a/25), (76b/18), (76b/20), (76b/27), (79b/5), (80a/18), (81a/8), (81a/10), (82b/16), (82b/23), (84a/17), (84a/22), (84b/12), (85a/24), (87a/9), (88b/9), (88a/16), (89b/14), (90a/24), (90b/27), (91b/21), (92a/1), (92a/1), (92a/24), (93a/26), (93a/

28), (93b/9), (93b/16), (94b/18), (96a/4), (96a/26), (98a/5), (100b/14), (100b/20), (102a/14), (103a/14), (103b/6), (103b/19), (104a/12), (104a/23), (104a/25), (105a/25), (107a/6), (107b/13), (108a/21), (108a/24), (108b/26), (109b/22), (110a/6), (112a/21), (113a/23), (113b/1), (114a/7), (114b/9), (115a/2), (115a/2), (115a/10), (115a/28) and (117a/4).

12. The rest of the examples of this type are (1b/16), (1b/17), (2a/11), (2a/19), (2b/21), (4b/27), (8b/24), (8b/25), (11a/24), (11b/4), (11b/28), (12b/18), (13b/3), (15b/20), (16b/14), (17a/5), (19a/8), (19a/15), (22a/21), (22b/8), (23a/5), (23a/27), (25a/9), (25a/16), (25a/21), (25a/22), (25b/15), (27b/25), (28a/9), (28b/3), (28b/16), (29b/6), (29b/27), (36b/18), (37a/22), (38a/10), (40b/11), (44b/18), (44b/19), (45a/1), (47a/20), (47b/17), (51a/15), (51b/10), (51b/11), (52a/9), (52b/13), (54a/19), (54b/26), (54b/28), (55a/18), (55a/19), (55a/28), (55b/8), (55b/10), (56a/10), (59a/12), (60a/22), (60b/10), (60b/19), (61a/23), (61a/26), (61b/25), (62a/13), (63a/28), (66b/14), (68a/9), (68b/18), (69b/11), (69b/22), (70b/1), (71a/26), (71b/17), (72a/10), (73a/4), (73b/17), (74a/7), (74a/8), (74b/25), (75a/11), (75b/16), (75b/18), (76a/8), (76a/22), (76b/7), (76b/13), (77a/1), (78a/23), (80b/1), (83b/2), (83b/16), (83b/28), (84a/23), (85a/23), (86a/28), (86b/6), (89b/17), (91b/19), (91b/26), (92a/26), (92b/24), (93b/5), (94a/5), (94a/8), (94b/1), (95b/14), (95b/22), (95b/26), (96b/18), (97a/26), (101a/10), (102b/27), (103b/18), (105b/1), (105b/8), (106a/13), (106b/11), (106b/12), (107a/18), (107b/7), (109a/6), (110a/3), (110a/12), (110b/5), (110b/14), (110b/15), (110b/20), (110b/22), (110b/24), (112a/20), (112a/23), (112b/27), (113b/1), (114b/15), (115a/18), (115a/19), (115b/8), (115b/16), (115b/26), (116b/8), (116b/10), (116b/19) and (117a/17).

13. The rest of the examples of this type are (2a/18), (4b/11), (4b/12), (6a/9), (10b/12), (14b/10), (17b/8), (18a/1), (18b/20), (20a/17), (30b/26), (37a/9), (41b/10), (45b/10), (49a/27), (59a/8), (62a/15), (66a/22), (66a/23), (93b/1), (100a/26), (107b/14), (110b/11), (113a/11), (114a/15), (114b/21), (114b/24) and (115a/5).

14. This line is applied twice in different meanings in *MED*, one in the sense of 'capacity' and the other in the sense of 'permission.' (*MED mouen* v. (3) 2b. (a), 7a) The latter sense seems to be more suitable.

Texts

CA : John Gower's *Confessio Amantis. The English Works of John Gower.* ed. G. C. Macaulay. EETS 81-2.

Ch. : *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer.* ed. F. N. Robinson. 2nd edition. Oxford, 1978.

    CT : *The Canterbury Tales*

    LGW : *The Legend of Good Women*

Mandev : *Mandeville's Travels.* ed. P. Hamelius. EETS 153.

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Semantic Shift of *Can* and *May*
in Middle English

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During the process of meaning change of *can* and *may*, there was a certain period of time when the two auxiliaries had meanings in common. This occurred when the original meaning of *can* denoting 'to know how to' was weakened. At the same time *can* was shifted to the meaning of *may* 'to be able to'.

In Chapter 1 of this paper, the semantic shift of *can* and *may* in Middle English was overviewed according to Visser, Traugott and *MED*. Then in Chapter 2, the meanings categorized in Chapter 1 were applied to the meanings of *can* and *may* to show how much of the transition could be found in the Early Middle English period through examination of the particular literary work *Ancrene Wisse*.