

MODAL VERBS AS INTERPERSONAL CUES IN AN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY DOMESTIC MANUSCRIPT*

Carolina González Quintana
Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria

Claudia E. Stoian
Politehnica University of Timisoara

ABSTRACT

This article examines the interpersonal and pragmatic functions of modal verbs in an early nineteenth-century domestic manuscript by Arabella Philippa Maule. The analysis shows a predominance of epistemic modals, with *will* as the most frequent form and unusually low use of *shall*. The higher-than-average presence of *should* and *may* produces an advisory tone, while directive, predictive, and advisory uses coexist with strategies of flexibility and care. Overall, Maule's modal profile balances authority and accommodation within Late Modern English domestic writing.

KEYWORDS: Modal Verbs, Historical Pragmatics, Domestic Manuscripts, Gendered Discourse, Late Modern English, Interpersonal Meaning.

LOS VERBOS MODALES COMO INDICADORES INTERPERSONALES EN UN MANUSCRITO DOMÉSTICO DE COMIENZOS DEL SIGLO XIX

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza las funciones interpersonales y pragmáticas de los verbos modales en un manuscrito doméstico de comienzos del siglo XIX compilado por Arabella Philippa Maule. El análisis muestra un predominio de los modales epistémicos, con *will* como forma más frecuente y un uso inusualmente bajo de *shall*. La presencia elevada de *should* y *may* genera un tono más orientador que prescriptivo, en el que conviven usos directivos, predictivos y de consejo con estrategias de flexibilidad y cuidado. En conjunto, el perfil modal de Maule equilibra autoridad y acomodación en la escritura doméstica del inglés moderno tardío.

PALABRAS CLAVE: verbos modales, pragmática histórica, manuscritos domésticos, discurso de género, inglés moderno tardío, significación interpersonal.

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the Late Modern English period, women's instructional writing in the form of recipe books, household manuals, and collections of remedies became an essential channel for passing on medical and scientific knowledge in the vernacular. Such texts contributed both to the practice of domestic medicine and to the emergence of female authorship in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Typically compiled in the household and circulated among kin or within neighborhood networks, these manuscripts were not only practical collections of experiential knowledge but also discursive spaces where women could exercise authority within the limits society allowed. One striking linguistic device in this negotiation of voice is the modal verb: auxiliaries such as *will*, *shall*, *must*, *may*, and *can*, which color the tone of an instruction and help define the relation between compiler and reader. To tell a reader "you must do X" carries a non-negotiable force; to say "you may do X" introduces permission or a degree of flexibility. By modulating such force, women writers could assert expertise while observing the politeness and restraint expected of them.

Research in historical linguistics and pragmatics confirms the central role of modality in instructional discourse (cf. Alonso Almeida 2015; Crespo & Moskowich 2021). Modals are not simply grammatical markers but pragmatic resources for shaping the interaction between writer and reader. Within Halliday's systemic-functional framework, they belong to the interpersonal metafunction: they register the speaker's judgment or attitude, ranging from certainty to obligation, and, in doing so, establish roles and tenor in discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). For a woman compiler, this meant finding a delicate balance. She had to show enough authority to guide her reader, yet avoid a bluntness that might be deemed inappropriate. Hence the choice of "you should do X" (a measured recommendation) over "you must do X" (a categorical command). Wodak (1997) has described this kind of mitigation as characteristic of gendered discourse, a strategy that enables persuasion in settings governed by patriarchal expectations.

Although historical pragmatics has developed considerably in recent decades (Fitzmaurice & Taavitsainen 2007), much of the work on modality and stance has rested on broad corpus evidence. The Coruña Corpus of historical scientific writing (Moskowich 2013) and, more recently, the CoWITE (Corpus of Women's Instructive Texts in English) project (Alonso-Almeida et al. 2025) have been central in tracing overall patterns in women's use of modals. These surveys confirm that women writers in the period relied heavily on modals to express judgments and to frame directives. Studies, such as Alonso-Almeida & Mele-Marrero (2014), underline the prominence of modalised instructions and stance adverbs in female-authored texts.

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Yet aggregated analyses inevitably blur the detail of individual practice. As Crespo & Moskowich (2021) remind us, to understand the interplay of gender and genre we need to listen closely to particular voices.

This paper offers such a close reading by turning to one compiler, Mrs. Arabella Philippa Maule, author of a manuscript of culinary and medical recipes held in the Wellcome Library (MS 3499, dated 1800-1828). The document provides a coherent and internally consistent body of writing, well suited to examining how modality operates as an interpersonal cue in context.

The analysis asks several questions. First, what is the distribution of modal verbs in Maule's manuscript, and how does it compare with contemporary data such as CoWITE19? Second, which semantic categories, namely epistemic, deontic, dynamic, are most prominent, and what stance do they project? Third, what pragmatic functions do the modals serve, i.e., do they issue instructions, offer advice, grant permission, provide reassurance, or entertain hypotheticals, and how do these functions help shape the relationship between compiler and reader? By combining quantitative corpus findings with close pragmatic interpretation, we argue that Maule's use of modals is a central rhetorical device through which she fashioned an authoritative yet approachable instructional voice. The study highlights not only her individual style but also specific formal developments in instructive genres, gendered strategies of communication, and the history of modality in English.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Modality has long been recognized as central to meaning in English, expressing the speaker's view of how likely, binding, or desirable a proposition may be (Palmer 2001). Semantically oriented accounts (Palmer 1990; Coates 1983) commonly distinguish three main types: epistemic modality, which evaluates truth or probability (e.g. *may*, *will* for possibility or prediction); deontic modality, which expresses what is permitted or required (e.g. *must*, *should*); and dynamic modality, which refers to ability or willingness (e.g. *can*, *could*). These categories provide a useful starting point, though they cannot capture the full range of uses. Narrog (2005) stresses that modals are often polyfunctional and must be interpreted pragmatically, with attention to speaker intention and discourse context. Nuyts (2001) likewise argues that modality reflects the speaker's assessment of a communicative situation rather than belonging solely to abstract semantic boxes.

Within systemic-functional linguistics (SFL), modality is treated as part of the interpersonal metafunction, as it helps shape social roles and relationships (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). The category here extends beyond auxiliaries to include adverbs (*perhaps*, *certainly*) and semi-modals (*have to*, *be able to*), though core auxiliaries remain the most economical way of signaling certainty, obligation, or inclination (Thompson 2014). SFL is particularly valuable for the present study because it draws attention to how choices in modality affect tenor, the social dimension of discourse. Selecting *shall* instead of *will*, for instance, can turn an instruction into an external prescription, whereas *will* is closer to a prediction or promise of outcome if directions



are followed. Such nuances are significant in texts where the writer is both instructor and advisor (Stoian 2020).

Gendered aspects of language use in historical settings have been noted by Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2009). Their work shows that women frequently adopted specific discursive strategies to claim authority in ways deemed socially acceptable. Alonso-Almeida & Álvarez-Gil (2021) found that female compilers of historical recipes occasionally employed firm directives, even sarcasm, to claim epistemic authority, though more often politeness and mitigation were the default (Brown & Gilman 1989; Curzan 2009). In domestic instructional writing, therefore, one expects an encouraging and collegial tone, with the compiler occupying a role akin to that of an experienced advisor or older relative. Wodak (1997) describes this dynamic as “double-voicing”: the simultaneous projection of expertise and deference. We shall see this tension in Maule’s frequent reliance on *should*, a form that frames advice while avoiding blunt command.

Maule’s manuscript belongs to the long tradition of the “domestic recipe book,” a hybrid genre that mixes medical cures, cookery instructions, household tips, and, at times, religious or literary extracts. Its conventions are recognizable, as recipes typically employ the imperative, with the agent understood rather than stated (e.g. “take two ounces of sugar, boil in water...”). Prior research (Alonso-Almeida 2013; Taavitsainen 2001) has shown that modals in recipes often mark conditional steps (*should be X, must not do Y*), express general truths (*will cure the ailment*), or allow alternatives (*may also add Z*). In this context, modals help authors assert credibility while observing a measure of modesty. A compiler who uses *must* signals a non-negotiable instruction; one who chooses *may* offers flexibility. Studies of Early Modern and eighteenth-century recipes (Moskovich 2010) found *must* and *will* to be especially common, consistent with the prescriptive character of the genre. By the nineteenth century, however, the distribution and meanings of modals were already shifting (Krug 2000; Leech et al. 2009). Tracing Maule’s choices against this background reveals whether her language is conservative or more innovative.

To place Maule’s manuscript in context, we draw comparisons with the Corpus of Women’s Instructive Texts in English, Nineteenth Century (CoWITE19; Alonso-Almeida et al. 2025). This reference corpus, covering women’s instructional writings between 1800 and 1900, provides modal frequencies and preferences typical of the genre. Alonso-Almeida (2023), for example, shows that *shall* and *will* dominate nineteenth-century recipe books, followed by *must*, with *might* and *could* much less frequent. Such patterns reflect the genre’s pragmatic focus on instruction and prediction. By comparing Maule’s text against this baseline we can identify both typical and distinctive features in her use of modals. A single-text analysis offers something broader surveys cannot: an explanation of why a compiler may diverge from the norm, whether because of personal style, the mixed contents of her manuscript, or changes already under way in the language.

In short, this study draws together insights from historical pragmatics, systemic-functional grammar, and gendered discourse analysis to examine modality in situ. The working assumption is that Maule’s modals are not incidental grammatical



choices, but tools closely bound up with genre, authority, and politeness. The next section sets out the corpus and methods used to analyze modals.

3. METHODOLOGY

The primary source for this study is a full transcription of Mrs. Arabella Philippa Maule's manuscript book (1800-1828), catalogued as Wellcome Collection MS 3499. Probably compiled in Scotland or England, the manuscript gathers a wide range of material: culinary recipes, medical remedies, household instructions, and even literary excerpts, among them quotations from Walter Scott. For the purposes of linguistic analysis, we included only the prose believed to be Maule's own, excluding long verbatim quotations from other authors. The transcription was prepared in plain text, retaining the original spelling and punctuation. The resulting corpus amounts to 17,188 tokens, with 3,893 distinct word forms. A type-token ratio of about 22.6% is consistent with the repetitive style of recipe writing, where formulaic phrasing and recurrent ingredient names are expected.

Annotation proceeded in two stages. First, the text was tagged for parts of speech with the CLAWS system in LancsBox v.5 (Brezina et al. 2021). This allowed the retrieval of all modal auxiliaries. We adopted a broad definition, covering canonical modals (*can, could, may, might, shall, should, will, would, must*) and periphrastic expressions (*have to, be able to, be to*), though in practice the latter were almost absent. Each candidate token was then manually checked in context. This step was essential to separate genuine modal use from homonyms (*will* as a noun, *must* meaning *grape must*) or from material not reflecting Maule's own text. For example, a quotation that reads "What else *shall* I have to fear?" contains a modal, but as it is clearly a literary aphorism it was not counted among her interpersonal strategies.

After verification, 246 modal verbs were identified. Each was assigned to one of the three standard semantic classes (epistemic, deontic, or dynamic) following Coates (1983) and Palmer (2001). In most cases the reading was straightforward: *must* "be well beaten" signals deontic necessity, while *will* "cure the cough" conveys epistemic prediction. Ambiguities were resolved by examining the co-text. For instance, in "If the patient *can* take it, add another spoon of brandy," *can* was judged dynamic, as it refers to physical capacity rather than permission.

A second layer of annotation addressed pragmatic function. Here, we drew on categories established in earlier studies of directives and recipes (e.g. Coates 1983; Hyland 1998). Six main functions were used: Instruction, Prediction, Permission, Advice, Reassurance, and Hypothetical Reasoning. Each modal was considered in context to determine which force was primary. Thus *must* in "you *must* boil for an hour" counts as Instruction, while *may* in "you *may* substitute honey for sugar" counts as Permission. Where functions overlapped, the most salient one was chosen. To check reliability, a fellow linguist independently coded a random fifth of the data. Agreement stood at 90 per cent; remaining differences were settled through discussion.



Quantitative analysis involved raw counts and normalization to occurrences per 10,000 words. Proportions of the semantic and pragmatic categories were also calculated out of the 246 modal tokens. Comparisons with external data draw on published frequencies from CoWITE19 (Alonso-Almeida et al. 2025). For example, Alonso-Almeida (2023) reports average rates of *shall*, *will*, and *must* in nineteenth-century women's recipes, which serve as points of reference. Because the present study focuses on a single text, we did not apply inferential statistics; the comparisons are illustrative rather than conclusive.

Two research caveats are in order. First, Maule's manuscript is multi-genre: alongside recipes it contains household notes and devotional extracts. This mixture may affect modal usage, as when *shall* occurs in a biblical quotation. We therefore concentrated on sections where Maule is actively instructing or explaining. Second, her text reflects a literate, probably upper-middle-class register, and may not capture the broader spectrum of women's domestic writing in the early nineteenth century. Even so, it offers a rich case study.

4. RESULTS

4.1. MODAL FREQUENCY AND DISTRIBUTION

In a corpus of 17,188 words, Maule employs 246 modal verb tokens. This corresponds to a density of 143.1 tokens per 10,000 words, which means that just over one per cent of her words are modal auxiliaries. The rate is somewhat lower than the average of around 170 tokens per 10,000 reported for nineteenth-century women's instructional texts in CoWITE19. Table 1 shows the distribution of forms, with both raw counts and normalized frequencies, alongside the CoWITE19 averages.

Modal	Raw Freq (Maule)	Per 10k (Maule)	Per 10k (CoWITE19 avg)
<i>will</i>	53	30.84	36.5
<i>must</i>	41	23.85	30.1
<i>may</i>	45	26.18	19.2
<i>shall</i>	16	9.31	39.8
<i>should</i>	30	17.45	12.1
<i>can</i>	26	15.13	6.4
<i>could</i>	11	6.39	-6.4 (est.)
<i>would</i>	18	10.47	2.07
<i>might</i>	6	3.49	-3 (est.)



The dominant form in Maule's book is *will* (53 tokens, 30.8 per 10k). That is not surprising: recipes thrive on promises of outcome, "This mixture *will* relieve a cough." What does stand out is that her rate is slightly below the CoWITE19 average. Perhaps she was more sparing in making predictive or promissory claims. The real anomaly, however, is *shall*. It occurs only 16 times (9.3 per 10k), while comparable texts reach nearly 40. In the recipe tradition, *shall* often carries a formal prescriptive force, almost legal in tone. Maule seems to avoid that register, turning instead to *should* or *may*. Where another compiler might insist "The mixture *shall* be stirred continuously," her phrasing is more often "The mixture *should* be stirred," a noticeable softening of the directive.

Her use of *should* is thus high (30 tokens, 17.5 per 10k, compared with a norm of 12.1). It constructs advice rather than instructions. In a single sentence, she orders that "the writing *should* be exposed to the dry air (the sun is preferable) one day at least before it is washed." The instructions are obvious, but they are enshrouded in the rhetoric of advice. *May* is still more indicative. At 26.2 per 10k, it well surpasses the average, and the functions are obvious at a glance: "strong soap *may* also be used"; "you *may* add a little ginger if desired." It is the rhetoric of choice, nodding towards the fact that readers have varying materials available or varying preferences.

In contrast, *must* is used less frequently (23.9 per 10k as opposed to a corpus average of 30.1). She uses it only where strictly necessary, "Galbanum...*must* be rubbed till dissolved," yet hardly ever beyond. It seems a modal she saves for situations where no latitude whatever can be extended. Here, we come to the oddity of *would*. Maule writes with it a total of 18 times (10.5 per 10k), some five times the average. Most of these are used in conditional threats: "if not properly dried, the ink *would* fade." Here and similar places *would* does more than tell; it defends the direction of the instruction with reference to what otherwise would happen. This accords with our pragmatic classification of "hypothetical reasoning," and it provides her writing an explanatory tone.

Also conspicuous is *can* (15.1 per 10k). Sentences like "Any person *can* make this at home" are indicative of feasibility and reassurance. It is the rhetoric of encouragement. Conversely, *could* (11 tokens), and *might* (6 tokens) may stay at the periphery, since speculation is avertible in the majority of recipes, as we encounter mostly instructive texts.

All considered, Maule's profile is familiar yet distinctive. She avoids the heavy-handedness of *shall* and leans on *should* and *may*, thereby maintaining authority without harshness. Her extensive use of *would* adds a layer of conditional reasoning, anticipating the reader's doubts and addressing them before they are voiced. The effect is an instructive voice that is confident but considerate, firm yet attentive to alternatives.

4.2. SEMANTIC MODAL CATEGORIES

We assigned each modal token to a semantic category (epistemic, deontic, dynamic), and the overall pattern is shown in Figure 1 below, which visualizes the



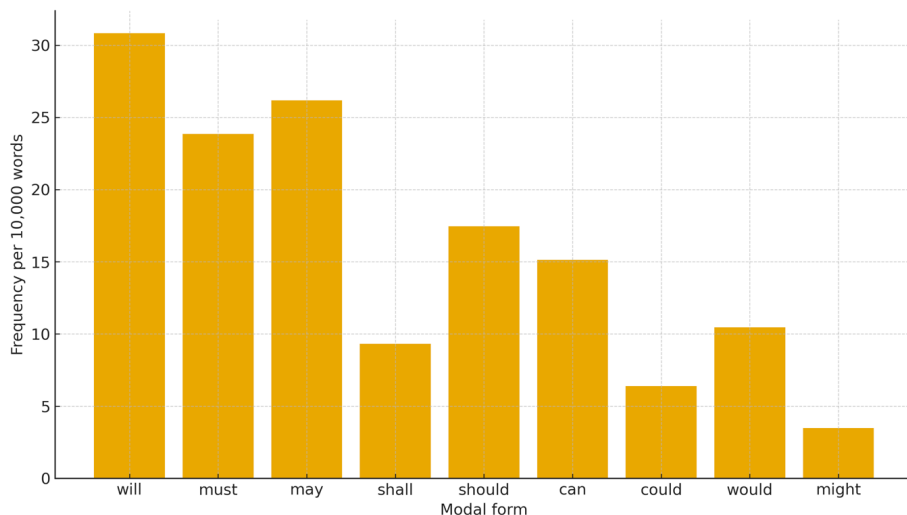


Figure 1. Distribution of semantic categories of modality in Maule's manuscript (per 10,000 words).

predominance of epistemic modality in Maule's text, followed by deontic and then dynamic modality:

Epistemic modality accounts for just over half of the tokens (133/246, about 54%). These are forms such as *will*, *may*, and *would* used to state predictions or possibilities. Maule often projects confidence, "The articles so washed *will* require to be several times rinsed," but she also leaves room for uncertainty, as in "It *may* preserve the milk sweet for several days." *Would*, *could*, and *might* occur when she moves into more cautious or hypothetical territory, sometimes outside recipe discourse proper. One entry even reflects on social life: "all these *would* be cut off," where *would* expresses a broader moral claim. The net effect of these epistemic choices is to present her as both knowledgeable and prudent. Certainty is foregrounded, but occasional hedges prevent overstatement and *may* have enhanced her credibility. We focus on each modal meaning in turn, in what follows.

- a) Epistemic modality. Maule leans heavily on epistemic forms, which suits her stance as informant and expert. With *will*, *may*, and *would* she casts outcomes as prediction or possibility. *Will* often marks what she treats as a regular consequence: "The articles so washed *will* require to be several times rinsed", an expectation grounded in practice. *May* licenses contingency: "It *may* preserve the milk sweet for several days", signaling that success depends on conditions. When she moves beyond the immediate procedure into conjecture, *would*, *could*, and *might* tend to take over, usually in conditionals or wider generalizations. "Many friendships are formed by sensual pleasures...



all these *would* be cut off” uses *would* to project a moral consequence rather than a kitchen result. On balance, her epistemic choices project authority without overreach: confident forecasts persuade, while lighter epistemics (*might, perhaps*) register uncertainty and keep promises modest. In a genre that stands or falls on practical credibility, that balance (mostly sure, sometimes hedged) works.

- b) Deontic modality. Deontic forms (*must, should, shall, may* in the sense of permission) constitute the second largest set and foreground the prescriptive core of recipe discourse. In Maule, *must* is the clearest marker of obligation. It clusters in critical steps, “The veal *must* be well beaten otherwise it *will* be hard,” where the injunction is immediately anchored in a consequence; the deontic push is buttressed by an epistemic warrant about likely results. *Shall* is rarer and tends to appear in copied, formal mandates, as in “The weight of every sort of bread... *shall* be in avoiddupois as follows...”, where the force is quasi-legal and external to the writer’s voice. In her own instructions, she largely avoids *shall*, favoring *must* or *should*. The form *should* carries much of the advisory load. It signals recommended procedure rather than compulsion, “Potatoes for boiling *should* be sorted, so that the large and the small *should* be boiled separately” (paraphrased), and suits Maule’s didactic yet courteous stance. Deontic *may* licenses action without imposing it (“The patient *may* take a spoonful in the morning”), granting readers discretion where the choice is safe or merely convenient.

Overall, the profile is one of tempered authority. Strong deontics occur where failure is a genuine risk (“must be done, or the outcome fails”), not to project rank. Elsewhere, *should* and *may* open space for judgement and accommodation. This graded system calibrates obligation to context and fine-tunes interpersonal distance: strict where protection is needed, permissive where it is not. A telling instance: “Brine the chops are salted in *must* not be added to the ham pickle but thrown away.” The prohibition is firm (*must not*), yet it is framed as error-prevention, keep salted brine out of fresh pickle, so the tone reads as protective rather than peremptory. In short, Maule’s deontic choices instruct, safeguard, and respect the reader’s autonomy, all at once.

- c) Dynamic modality. Dynamic forms, chiefly *can* and *cannot*, are least represented, which is to be expected in a text more concerned with what should or will be done than with agents’ abilities. In instructional prose, *can* often appears in patterns such as “you *can* do X if Y” or in generic statements of feasibility (“anyone *can* obtain this ingredient”). Maule’s *can* oscillates between pure ability and uses that verge on permission. Thus, “In summer, the cordial *can* be made without heating” signals that circumstances permit the method; it is possible because the conditions allow it. These dynamic tokens mark what is workable in practice and how a procedure adapts when something can or cannot be done. Their low frequency is unsurprising: the text largely presumes a competent reader who can follow the steps unless told otherwise.



Where dynamic marking does appear, it targets concrete contingencies, “if the patient *cannot* take milk warm, it *can* be given cold,” accommodating tolerance or capacity without dwelling on personal skill.

This sparing use aligns with the genre’s center of gravity: method and outcome take precedence over individual ability. When dynamic modality surfaces, it tends to be impersonal (“this *can* be done”) rather than addressee-directed (“you *can* do this”), which avoids commenting on the reader’s competence and keeps the advisory tone courteous. In sum, Maule’s modal profile remains predominantly epistemic, with a substantial deontic stratum; dynamic modality plays a minor, pragmatic role, confirming feasibility at the margins rather than shaping the instructional voice.

4.3. PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF MODALS

Every modal token was coded for its pragmatic role in its immediate co-text. Table 2 sets out the six functions defined earlier, with raw counts for Maule’s manuscript. Row by row, the figures show how often each function surfaces across the corpus, so the pattern is visible at a glance. This was a token-by-token pass rather than a broad sweep, which keeps the mapping from context to function transparent.

PRAGMATIC FUNCTION	RAW FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE OF MODALS
Instruction (Directive)	91	36.99%
Prediction	59	23.98%
Advice	41	16.67%
Permission	23	9.35%
Reassurance	17	6.91%
Hypothetical reasoning	15	6.10%

These categories show, in practical terms, how Maule’s modals work as interpersonal signals and as deliberate argumentative moves. In what follows, we take them one by one, highest to lowest frequency, as shown in Figure 2, and illustrate each with brief extracts (from firm *must* to permissive *may*, and the in-between *should*), noting how these choices shape her manner of address and the kind of guidance she offers.

- a) Instruction (37% of modals). The largest set covers uses where modals direct actions or secure a procedural step. That fits the genre. The deontic trio, *must*, *shall*, *should*, accounts for most of the 91 tokens here. In a glue-making recipe, for example, “Galbanum [...] *must* be rubbed till dissolved.” *Must*



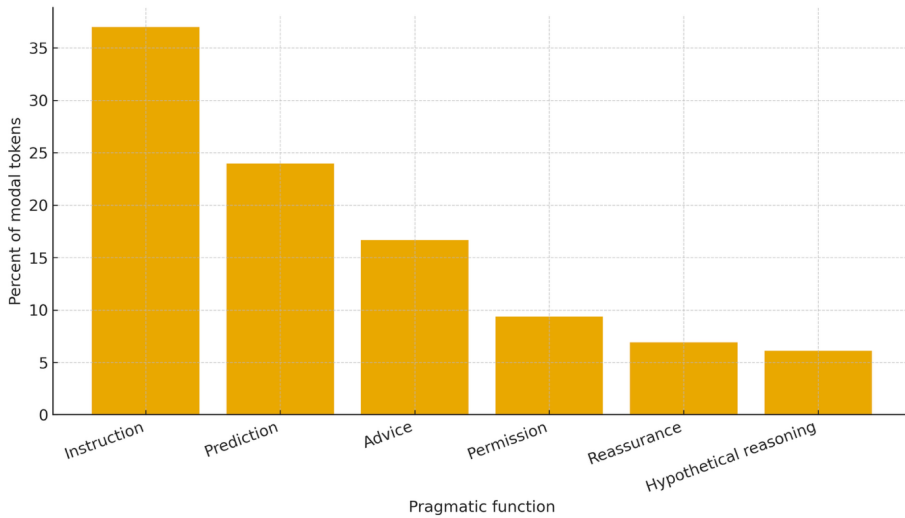


Figure 2. Pragmatic functions encoded by modals

presents the step as non-optional and anchored in process. *Shall* appears in more formal frames, as in “They *shall* boil an hour” (puddings), a phrasing with the ring of a rule. In places the manuscript shows voice-blending: one line reads “They *must* boil an hour,” another recasts it with *shall*, likely echoing copied regulations and lending quasi-official weight. *Should* softens the directive into best practice: “The writing *should* be exposed to dry air one day before washed.” The guidance remains clear, but the tone is advisory rather than absolute.

Crucially, even within instruction, Maule grades force. *Must* targets steps where deviation risks failure, chemical conditions, safety, or keystone stages. *Should* signals the preferred method, leaving room for practicable alternatives. The contrast is visible across domains: in baking, she doubles *must* (“the butter *must* be creamed... which *must* all be beat separately very fine”), marking sequential essentials; in cleaning, “the writing *should* be exposed to dry air (sun is preferable) one day at least,” a strong recommendation rather than a rigid rule. Readers thus learn not only what to do, but how much it matters: *must-do* versus *should-do*, with *may* (treated under Permission) marking the optional.

Maule also pairs instructional modals with rationales. “Do X, otherwise Y *will* happen” joins a deontic requirement with an epistemic forecast. The combination instructs and reassures at once. It is a pedagogical move: compliance follows more readily when the reason is plain, and household discourse often makes that reasoning explicit where professional manuals of the period could be terse.



b) Prediction (24% of modals). The second most frequent function is predictive: modals used to forecast results, outcomes, or future states given certain steps or conditions. Here, the load falls on epistemic *will* and *would*, with occasional *should* in the sense of ‘is expected to’ (counted as epistemic where it clearly signals expectation). We identified 59 instances, nearly a quarter of all modals, in which Maule effectively says: follow this procedure and X will happen. Recipe discourse thrives on such outcome lines (“the mixture *will* turn white”; “it *will* cure the ailment in a day”), and in Maule, *will* does most of the work: “After mixing, it *will* become thick”; “The patient *will* feel relief in ten minutes.” These forecasts steady the reader’s hand. They set a horizon of expectation and double as checkpoints: if X will happen and it doesn’t, something has gone awry.

Would appears in conditional or quasi-predictive frames, “If left to stand, it *would* turn sour by morning.” This shades into hypothetical reasoning, yet the force remains forward-looking: it predicts an outcome under a non-ideal scenario. The move teaches by negative example and, we suspect, distils experience; one hears the voice of someone who has seen what follows when a step is skipped. The prominence of predictive modality casts Maule as a knowledgeable witness to consequences and efficacy. It also serves a persuasive end common in historical medical and domestic writing, assuring readers that remedies and methods “will” work (cf. “applied thus, it *will* remove the stain”; see also Alonso-Almeida 2015). In practice, prediction often sits alongside instruction but is not the same as reassurance: it states what follows, plainly, without addressing anxieties. That it ranks second overall shows the discourse is not purely imperative; it is instructive and explanatory in tandem. Maule does not simply say “do X”; she adds “and Y *will* result,” which makes the text easier to follow and, frankly, more teachable.

c) Advice (17% of modals). Here Maule is counselling rather than commanding. There are 41 tokens (16.7%). The workhorses are *should* and *may*; *can* sometimes edges in when “you *can*...” reads as a gentle nudge. We treat a case as Advice when the phrasing signals preference or leeway, not necessity. So “One *should* not use metal pans for this purpose” is seasoned guidance drawn from practice; “For a delicate stomach, one *may* omit the pepper” opens an option without pressure. In her manuscript, *should* often carries housecraft beyond the recipe proper, general upkeep, storage, small efficiencies. *May* sits beside it to license alternatives: “Strong soap *may* also be used... a fine brush with fine emery will finish the whole.” That first clause reads as a sanctioned workaround; permission and suggestion blur. A clearer instance from cookery: “Potatoes for boiling *should* be sorted, so that the large and the small *should* be boiled separately.” Mixing sizes won’t ruin the dish, but sorting improves it; that is precisely the advisory pitch.

Why it matters that advice ranks third: it shows a compiler who teaches by guidance. *Must* is saved for failure-sensitive stages; *should* and *may* convey “this



works better” without talking down to the reader. The effect is collaborative. We hear a practiced voice passing on what has proved reliable and doing so in a way that invites trust.

- d) Permission (9% of modals). We counted 23 tokens (-9.4%) where Maule explicitly licenses options, typically with *may* and sometimes *can*. These uses cluster around optional steps, substitutions, and reader discretion. A neat illustration: “Spirit of salt... *may* be applied to the spot; and after a minute or two *may* be washed off; repeating its application as often as *may* be found necessary.” The triple *may* parcels out choice at each stage, apply, remove, repeat, so the reader can calibrate action to stain severity. Likewise, “One *may* omit the nutmeg if the patient dislikes it” invites tailoring to taste or tolerance. *Can* plays a similar role in substitutions: “If no fresh yeast, one *can* use dried yeast.” These permissions do more than soften the tone; they acknowledge real-world variability in ingredients, tools, and circumstances, and they keep the procedure useful when the ideal set-up is not to hand. In effect, Maule signals: here is the default method, yet acceptable alternatives exist. That stance maintains authority while treating the reader as a competent agent who will sometimes need to adapt.
- e) Reassurance (7% of modals). We identified 17 tokens (6.9%) where modals steady the reader, typically by promising efficacy or safety, or by easing a likely worry. The carrier is often epistemic *will*: “This ointment *will* not irritate the skin,” “The patient *will* recover strength by morning” (examples in Maule’s vein). Here *will* does double duty, stating a result and, crucially, offering comfort. Occasional semi-modal turns such as *need not* (“you *need not* worry about...”) work similarly, even if *need* was not tallied in the core list. Reassurance frequently shadows prediction, but the intent differs: prediction tells you what follows; reassurance anticipates the “*will* it work, is it safe?” and answers it. Maule’s milk note captures the blend: unattended milk “*will* become sour,” yet treated milk “*may* be preserved sweet for days.” The contrast warns and soothes in one move, and the reader hears a practical guarantee. Phrases of the period like “it *will not fail* to alleviate the cough if taken properly” function in the same way, and simple negatives, “the gall *will not* smell after rinsing,” close down a specific anxiety.

Sometimes permission carries the reassuring load: “You *may* safely administer this to children” licenses an action and marks it safe. Elsewhere, lighter epistemics, *might*, *could*, *would*, temper claims; that restraint itself reassures by sounding measured rather than overblown. In short, reassurance is a small category, but it matters for trust. Maule speaks as a benevolent expert who not only instructs but also calms, acknowledging real doubts and meeting them head-on.

- f) Hypothetical reasoning (6% of modals). The least frequent yet revealing set comprises 15 tokens (≈6.1%). Here *would*, *could*, and sometimes *might* project “what if” scenarios, usually in conditional frames, explicit or implied.



Typical moves include warning-by-imagination, “Without stirring, it *might* settle at the bottom,” or counterfactual projection, “If left to stand, it *would* turn sour by morning.” Such uses let Maule speak beyond the straight recipe line: she tests alternatives, flags exceptions, and explains why a step matters by sketching the consequence of neglecting it. The tone is measured rather than dogmatic. Instead of “Do not do Z,” we get “If one were to do Z, it *could* lead to trouble,” which invites the reader to reach the right conclusion. Hypothetical modals also help generalize: “In damp weather, this *would* take longer to dry,” or “If the fever worsened, one *might* double the dose.” The effect is a tutor’s voice that reasons with the reader, acknowledges limits, and keeps advice proportionate.

The pragmatic profile is not accidental. *Instruction* and *prediction* form the backbone, delivering procedures and expected outcomes. *Advice* and *permission* open room for choice and adaptation; *reassurance* steadies the reader when safety or efficacy is at issue; *hypothetical reasoning* adds foresight and nuance. All in all, these patterns fashion Maule as “an authoritative yet accommodating compiler”: confident in remedies (epistemic authority), clear about requirements (deontic authority), and consistently attentive to the reader’s perspective through optionality, comfort, and scenario-testing. This balance aligns with observations in Alonso-Almeida & Álvarez-Gil (2021): women compilers in this tradition often mediate authority through guidance and empathy rather than blunt command. Maule rarely speaks in the first person, yet her modal choices carry stance and relation; they build trust and keep the discourse collaborative. In what follows, we situate this profile within wider nineteenth-century practices of domestic and medical instruction, with attention to gendered voices in historical discourse.

5. DISCUSSION

The analysis of modal verbs in Arabella Maule’s manuscript offers rich insights into how a 19th-century woman writer managed the dual aims of conveying expert knowledge and maintaining social rapport in an instructional text. In this discussion, we highlight three key aspects of the findings: (1) Modal choices as a reflection of genre conventions and innovations, (2) Interpersonal stance and gendered discourse strategies revealed by modals, and (3) Comparative perspectives from CoWHITE19 and other corpora to contextualize Maule’s usage historically, as evinced in Figure 3.

Maule’s modal profile largely matches what we expect in domestic recipe writing, yet there are telling wrinkles that point to change around 1800. As in the genre generally, in this genre, deontic and epistemic forms dominate, so the discourse works both as “how to” and as “what to expect”. The prominence of *must* and *will* sits comfortably with earlier collections, where these modals secure procedure and promise efficacy (Taavitsainen 2001; Alonso-Almeida 2013). What stands out is her restrained use of *shall*. In Late Modern English, *shall* was the directive workhorse in formal registers, legal phrasing and cookbook formulae alike. In Maule’s manuscript,



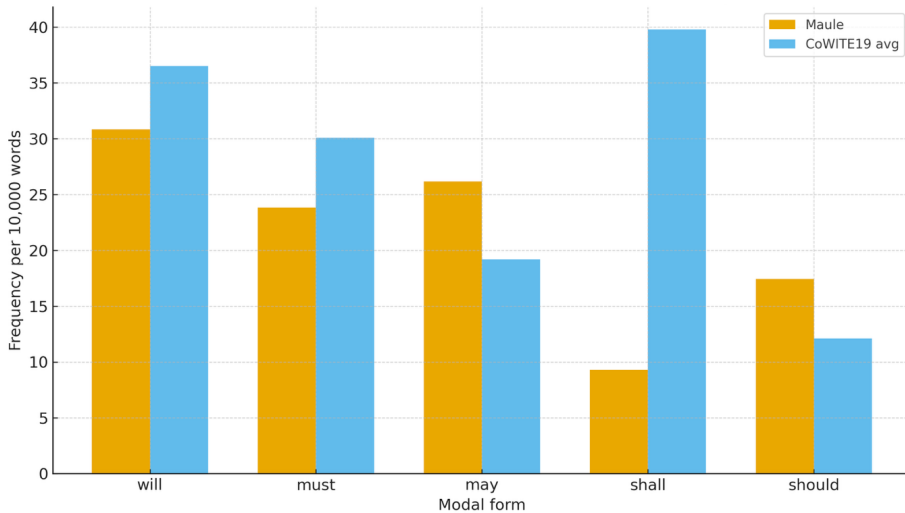


Figure 3. Maule vs. CoWITE19 (will, shall, should, may, must)

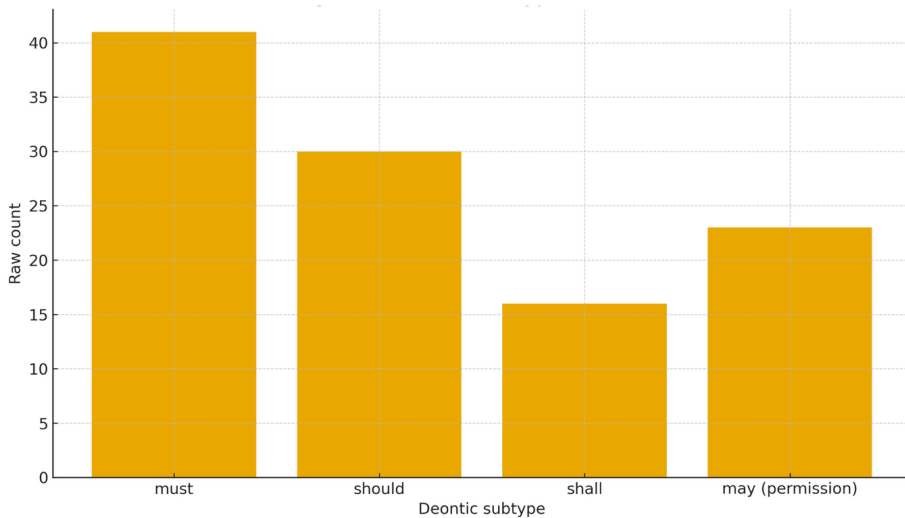


Figure 4. Deontic subtypes in Maule (must / should / shall / may-permission).

it is scarce (16 tokens). This could signal a stylistic shift towards more practical, less ceremonious prose in 1800-1828, with *will* and *should* taking over directive duties (Myhill 1995). Her preference for *should* where *shall* might once have appeared suggests a move towards reader-friendly instruction. It may also reflect regional habits; if Scottish usage shaped her ear, *shall* may simply have felt less natural for imperatives. Since CoWITE19 shows *shall* remained common overall (see Figure 4),



Maule's pattern is somewhat atypical, perhaps deliberately so to keep the tone warmer and less authoritarian.

Genre mixing in the manuscript helps explain local deviations. When she quotes a regulation or offers a proverbial turn, *shall* or *will* resurfaces with the force appropriate to that embedded register; in religious or moral snippets, *shall* can voice conviction or prophecy. Our analysis centers on the instructional core, but the general discursive setting matters. Modal choice tracks immediate purpose and the textual ecology in which a line appears. This is a familiar lesson in historical pragmatics, forms are not only period features but also responses to situated tasks (Fitzmaurice & Taavitsainen 2007). Maule seems to know the formal option perfectly well, she reproduces it when citing a rule, yet in her own voice she trims *shall* back, letting other modals carry the directive load with a lighter touch.

The pattern of pragmatic functions we observed, dominated by instructions, but closely followed by predictions and peppered with advice and permissions, reveals a concerted effort by Maule to connect with her reader on a relational level while delivering content. This is where gender likely plays a role. In the early 19th century, a female author of a household book would be expected to adopt a helpful, nurturing persona more than an overtly authoritative one, even if she was indeed an authority in practice. Maule achieves this by making her directives sound like shared knowledge and caring guidance rather than bossy commands. For instance, when she uses *must*, she frequently couples it with caring justification (“*must* be well beaten or else it *will* be tough,” implying concern that the dish turns out well for you). When she uses *should* or *may*, she invites the reader to trust her recommendations without feeling coerced. This resonates strongly with observations from studies of women's language (e.g., Holmes 1995 on politeness): women are often found to use more modal forms that facilitate agreement and rapport, such as hedges (*could*, *might*), and inclusive modals (*let's*, *we can* in some cases). Maule doesn't use inclusive “we” in modals (e.g., “we *shall* do X”), which is interesting. She mostly uses impersonal or imperative forms. But through modals like *may* and *should*, she achieves inclusivity by leaving room for the reader's input, an effect similar to using inclusive pronouns.

Moreover, the category of *Advice* being significant (17%) is suggestive. Advice is inherently interpersonal: it presupposes a relationship where one cares about the other's well-being or success. The presence of so much advice suggests that Maule is positioning herself not just as an instructor but as a mentor or confidante. This reflects what sociolinguist Susan Fitzmaurice (2000) notes about letters and didactic texts by women in the 18th-19th centuries, they often employ a conciliatory, counsel-giving tone as a strategy to impart knowledge without appearing presumptuous. In Maule's case, by giving advice and permissions, she reduces social distance; the reader is treated like a family member or a friend being coached, rather than a subordinate being ordered.

Maule's prose balances epistemic confidence with interpersonal tact. In medical passages especially, readers need the assurance that a remedy will work; at the same time a strident tone would risk resistance. Her solution, as it seems to me, is consistent: state outcomes with certainty, phrase directives with room for judgement. “This mixture *will* certainly ease the pain; you *may* take it twice daily if needed.” The first clause secures trust in the effect; the second grants discretion over



use. The pattern holds across the manuscript. *Will* forecasts results and helps readers track success; *must* appears where deviation would spoil the process. Elsewhere, *should* and *may* carry guidance that is strong yet not absolute, and *can* occasionally signals a workable alternative when circumstances vary. The voice that emerges is authoritative without sounding bossy.

This sits, plausibly, within the period's gendered expectations. A technical manual by a man in the 1820s might lean on bare imperatives with fewer hedges; Maule prefers calibrated force that keeps face in view. Modality becomes the means of "negotiated authority": expertise asserted when failure matters, latitude granted when it does not. The effect is cooperative.

Set against comparable texts, a more nuanced picture emerges. Maule is modal-heavy, but a touch below the CoWITE19 average (143 vs 170 per 10k), which hints at more descriptive or narrative stretches, unsurprising in a manuscript that mixes recipes with copied extracts and lists. Within that leaner overall rate, her preferences are clear: *will*, *may*, *should*, *can*, and *would* sit higher than the norm; *shall* and *must* sit lower. In effect, she inverts the usual *shall-will* balance and lifts *should* and *may* above their typical share. The result is a more consultative sound than one hears in many straight recipe corpora.

Genre composition matters here. Alonso-Almeida's comparison set is monogeneric (recipes only), whereas Maule's book is multi-genre. That alone can depress *shall*, common in formal recipe rubrics and legal-style prescriptions, and raise *would* in reflective notes that sketch scenarios a pure recipe text rarely entertains. Functionally, the profile suggests more advice and reassurance than is typical: higher *should* and *may* often track advisory moves, while lower *must/shall* points to fewer hard imperatives. Read this way, Maule comes across as unusually reader-centered. Another compiler with more *must* and *shall* would feel sharper, less accommodating. From a modern vantage point, her spectrum looks forward-leaning: effective, personable, and geared to real kitchens and sickrooms rather than to formulae alone.

The patterns here speak to familiar currents in historical linguistics. One is the slow drift towards colloquial, more personalized scientific and technical prose (cf. Smitterberg 2008). As a domestic science compilation, Maule's manuscript shows that drift in miniature: modality is less rigid; *you* is often tacitly present in *should* and *may*; the overall feel is instructional yet anecdotal, as if oral know-how and written sources have been stitched together. Modals are a well-known pressure point in English change around 1800. We see the decline of *shall* in some uses and the broader rise of semi-modals such as *have to* (even if not salient here). Maule's tendency to favor *should* over *shall* may hint at an early redistribution of labor between the two in less formal registers.

From a pragmatic angle, the text shows how grammar carries social meaning in practice, not just in theory. Across the manuscript, modal choices map cleanly onto interpersonal effects. In this sense, *must* is used when failure matters; *will* is deployed to steady expectations; *should* and *may* appears to advise without cornering the reader; occasional *can* signals workable alternatives. The form-function pairing is consistent enough to count as a strategy rather than a habit, and it gives a concrete case of how modal systems scaffold stance in nineteenth-century English.



There is also a line to gendered discourse traditions. Maule's authoritative yet caring voice sits comfortably with earlier compilers such as Hannah Woolley or Eliza Smith, who mix procedure with guidance that reads as household wisdom. The continuity matters: even where Maule's specific tweaks are her own, the underlying ethos of care persists, and modality is one of how it is realized.

6. CONCLUSION

This study has traced in detail how Arabella Philippa Maule's early nineteenth-century manuscript uses modal verbs as interpersonal cues, showing modality at work across semantic, pragmatic, and socio-discursive planes. Combining corpus counts with close reading, we argue that Maule's modal choices build an authorial voice that couples instructional authority with approachability and care.

Epistemic forms (*will*, *may*) project confidence in efficacy and in expected outcomes, while deontic forms, chiefly *must* and *should*, stage the procedure with graded force, separating indispensable steps from recommended practice. The result is both informative and directive: expertise that invites trust and, at the same time, steers action. Roughly 37% of tokens issue direct instructions, but about 40% work advisably, permissively, or predictively; these soften, qualify, or elaborate injunctions. Advice often rides on *should*; options are opened with *may* and *can*. Reassurance appears in confident futures ("*will* [certainly happen]"), and hypothetical reasoning in conditional frames ("*would* [if]"), which anticipates worries and "what-if" scenarios. The discourse reads as collaborative rather than peremptory, consistent with contemporary norms of feminine propriety and courtesy. Against women's instructive writing of the period, Maule's profile is broadly typical (with *will*, *must*, *may* as mainstays) yet idiosyncratic in its conspicuously low *shall* and higher reliance on *should*, *may*, and *would*. We read this as a stylistic preference that leans towards a more personal, less formal tone, in step with shifts around 1800 and with the manuscript's multi-genre texture. In short, Maule flexes recipe conventions to meet communicative aims, foreshadowing later nineteenth-century moves towards more conversational advisory prose.

In sum, modality in Maule's manuscript is not merely grammar; it is the machinery of pragmatics and persona. Through finely judged modal choices, she moves between two roles with ease: expert compiler of remedies and companionable adviser. The result is a grammar thick with interpersonal cues, signals of sympathy, flexibility, and confidence worked into the very wording of instructions. A single-author lens lets us see this interplay clearly, and it reminds us how individual style meets gendered expectations and genre conventions to produce nuance that broad corpus trends can miss.

The study's contribution is twofold. First, it brings classic accounts of modality (e.g., Coates 1983; Palmer 2001) into a domestic manuscript context, showing how epistemic, deontic, and dynamic values take on distinct pragmatic shades in early-nineteenth-century use. Second, it adds detail to Late Modern English practice at a transitional moment, including the ebb of *shall*. Methodologically, the



work demonstrates how quantitative corpus counts and qualitative functional analysis can be yoked to recover “pragmatic richness and authorial specificity”, and it offers a replicable template for similar single-text enquiries.

Maule’s case suggests that women writing in seemingly modest genres such as recipe books were doing far more than listing steps: they were shaping voice and authority with linguistic care. The “negotiated authority” we trace here looks like a practical strategy for working within the constraints on women’s communicative power. It also asks us to read these texts differently. A recipe is not just procedure; it is rhetoric, choice of *must* or *should*, *may* or *will*, and those choices carry stance. A pointed comparison would sharpen this picture: set Maule’s modal profile against a male-authored contemporary handbook (say, a physician’s manual) and watch how imperatives, hedges, and permissions distribute.

To conclude, this is a single-manuscript study, and certainly further research is needed. The next step is scale, i.e., to extend the functional coding to CoWITE18/19 to test representativeness, do women’s texts show more advice-oriented *should/may* than men’s? do frequencies shift from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century? A second thread is compositional, i.e., to examine modal sequences and pairings we left aside (e.g., double modality such as *might perhaps*; modal + semi-modal patterns), since these often fine-tune stance. A third is integrative, i.e., to bring in other interpersonal resources, vocatives, stance adverbials (*perhaps*), even tag questions, to model how modality works alongside them in Maule’s voice. Finally, a contrastive line of enquiry, comparing similar genres in other languages or regions, would tell us whether what we see is distinctively English or part of a wider pattern in women’s instructional writing of the period.

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