

The Absolute Infinitive in Chaucer: With Special Reference to Parenthetical Use of *Seien, Speken, and Tellen**

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1. Introduction

1.1. Aim

This article, after overviewing the use of the absolute infinitive in Chaucer, will discuss some stylistic features of the parenthetical use of *seien*, *speken*, and *tellen*. For the purpose the data from Chaucer will be compared to those from his contemporaries.

Following Visser,¹⁾ this article will use the term “absolute infinitive,”²⁾ in a broad sense. He deals with infinitives which, used independently or absolutely, express, exclamations, imperatives, and observations of the speaker/writer or take the place of a finite form of the verb, etc. (§§983-99).

1.2. Historical Sketch until Late Middle English Period

Historically speaking, the absolute infinitive was found in Old English but with few examples as Visser says (§987). However, it seems to have developed as the infinitive expanded its adverbial function from purpose to condition, concession, and result during the early Middle English period (T. Nakao 314).

1.3. Previous Studies

Only few attempts have so far been made at the absolute infinitive. Among many diachronic studies on the infinitive, only Visser seems to deal with the absolute infinitive individually with substantial amount of data from the Old English period to the 20th century. However, he does not focus on adverbs or adverbial phrases used in the parenthetical infinitive constructions or mention their stylistic features.

Concerning synchronic studies, Manabe and Quirk describe the use of infinitives in early English and in Chaucer respectively, but not elaborating on the absolute

infinitive. Masui picks up parenthetical expressions containing the infinitive *seien*, *speken*, *tellen*, and *passen* as rhyming tags. Y. Nakao (1997) looks into expressions using *soth*, such as *soth to sey*, in *Troilus and Criseyde* (*Tr*³) and points out that these expressions are used not only to make rhymes but to arouse the listeners' attention to the veracity of the speaker's statement (or the proposition).

The present research excludes the bare infinitive because it "is hard to decide whether the form was still felt in Chaucer's time to be a subjunctive, which it originally was, or whether it had entirely lost its modal character" (Kerkhof §163).

2. Overview of Absolute Infinitive in Chaucer

This section overviews Chaucer's examples of the absolute infinitive following Visser's category. The verbs used in the construction in Chaucer are as follows:

bathen, *beholden*, *ben* (x4), *bidden*, *chacen* (x2), *comen*, *concluden* (x2), *desiren*, *devisen* (x2), *don* (x3), *echen*, *enditen*, *fallen*, *falsen*, *fighten*, *gessen*, *gon* (x7), *grucchen*, *haven*, *laughen*, *lernen*, *loven*, *maken*, *passen* (x5), *peinen*, *receiven*, *reken*, *seien* (x70), *shouten*, *sheten*, *speken* (x34), *taken*, *tellen* (x41), *thenken*, *treten*, *wenen*, *werken*, *winnen* (x3)

It is clear that *seien*, *speken*, and *tellen*, which are used in the parenthetical construction as to be seen later, appear by far the most frequently.

2.1. Types

2.1.1. Historical Infinitive

In this type an infinitive is used for a finite form of the verb. Mustanoja points out that the type appears in "lively, impulsive narration" (538). The type "occurs sporadically in Middle and early Modern English (Visser §998).

Quotation [1] is a description of the battle between Egyptian and Roman troops. The infinitive phrase *for to shoute and shete* is used with its notional subject, both the armies, implied.

[1] Up goth the trompe, and *for to shoute and shete*,
And peynen hem to sette on with the sunne. (LGW 635-36)⁴

2.1.2. Exclamation

The infinitive also express the speaker's exclamations. Mustanoja points out the similarity of the speaker's psychological state between in this type and in the previous one:

Impulsiveness leads one to disregard form: in a state of excitement the speaker has no time or patience to choose the proper tense, mood, person, etc., an expression of the mere verbal idea being sufficient to meet the needs of the moment. (539)

Typical examples are [2] and [3].

[2] Allas, *to bidde a woman gon by nyghte*
In place there as peril falle myghte! (LGW 838-39)

[3] For evermore, y trowe trewly,
 For al my wille, my lust holly
 Ys turned; but yet, *what to doone?* (BD 687-89)

2.1.3. Futurity, Purpose, Command, etc.

As Mustanoja (542) says, the absolute infinitive appears in the "construction with a nominative subject, occasionally used to express futurity, expectation, purpose, or even command". Quotation [4] is from the speech of a man to his lord, the marquis, in *The Clerk's Tale*. Following the expression *I ... aske*, the absolute infinitive with the subject appears as the italicized words show.

[4] I dar the bettre aske of yow a space
 Of audience to shewen oure requeste,
 And *ye, my lord, to doon* right as yow leste. (CIT 103-05)

2.1.4. Attendant Circumstances

There is an example of the absolute infinitive which might express attendant circumstances: [5]. As for this, Kerkhof (§185) treats the phrase *to bathe hire myrily* as a free adjunct,⁵⁾ while Mustanoja (536-37) states that the phrase is the infinitive of manner with *lith* (*lien*) in line 3268.

- [5] Faire in the soond, *to bathe hire myrily*,
 Lith Pertelote, and alle hire sustres by,
 Agayn the sonne, and Chauntecleer so free
 Soong murier than the mermayde in the see (*NPT* 3267-70)

2.1.5. Parenthetic Observation

This type is different from the others in that the subject, which is not expressed, is always the speaker. Progressing the narrative and making the speaker's comment on the propositional content, the infinitive construction functions as Brinton's discourse or pragmatic marker.

As seen above, *seien*, *speken*, and *tellen* are frequently used in this type. For example, in [6] Pandarus in *Tr* uses *soth for to seyne* to solace Troilus' love sickness by emphasizing that Pandarus also has been suffering from it.

- [6] So ful of sorwe am I, *soth for to seyne*,
 That certainly namore harde grace
 May sitte on me, for-why ther is no space. (*Tr* 1.712-14)

Some other verbs also appear in this construction. In [7] *for to gesse* shows the narrator's estimation of the two jousting groups in *The Knight's Tale*.

- [7] For ther was noon so wys that koude seye
 That any hadde of oother avauntage
 Of worthynesse, ne of estaat, ne age,
 So evene were they chosen, *for to gesse*. (*KnT* 2590-93)

Citations [8] and [9] have the construction to progress the narration.

- [8] And *shortly to the point right for to gon*,
 This faire wyf acorded with daun John
 That for these hundred frankes he sholde al nyght
 Have hire in his armes bolt upright; (*ShipT* 313-16)

- [9] And, *shortly of this proces for to pace*,
 She made Mynos wynnyn thilke place, (*LGW* 1914-15)

The high frequency of this type leads to Mustanoja's statement: "Chaucer's fondness of this type of construction is well known; it is, in fact, one of the striking features of his chatty narrative style" (542).

3. Parenthetical Use of *Seien*, *Speken*, and *Tellen*

This section concentrates on the parenthetical construction of *seien*, *speken*, and *tellen* in Chaucer. The following works, contemporary to him, are used for comparison: *Confessio Amantis* (CA), *Pearl*, *The Cloud of Unknowing* (CU; prose), *The Shewings of Julian of Norwich* (JN; prose), *Mandeville's Travels* (MT; prose), *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (GGK; alliterative), and *The Visions of Piers Plowman* (PPI; alliterative).

3.1. Statistical Data

Table 1 shows the statistical data of parenthetical *seien*, *speken*, and *tellen*.

Table 1. Frequencies of Parenthetical *Seien*, *Speken*, and *Tellen*

Works	<i>seien</i>	100K	<i>speken</i>	100K	<i>tellen</i>	100K
Chaucer	70	18.1	34	8.8	41	10.6
<i>Anel</i>	1	36.0	1	36.0	0	0
<i>BD</i>	12	137.9	3	34.5	4	46.0
<i>CT</i>	19	10.4	22	12.1	12	6.6
<i>GP</i>	2	29.9	3	44.9	3	44.9
<i>KnT</i>	2	11.6	4	23.3	4	23.3
<i>ML</i>	3	148.0	1	49.3	1	49.3
<i>ParsT</i>	0	0	7	23.0	0	0
<i>Mel</i>	0	0	3	17.7	0	0
<i>HF</i>	4	30.1	0	0	7	52.6
<i>LGW</i>	3	14.0	3	14.0	3	14.0
<i>PF</i>	2	36.2	0	0	0	0
<i>Pity</i>	1	109.3	0	0	0	0
<i>Rom</i>	1	9.4	0	0	4	37.4
<i>Tr</i>	27	41.1	5	7.6	11	16.7
<i>CA</i>	13	6.3	59	28.5	27	13.0
<i>CU</i>	7	18.9	0	0	0	0
<i>GGK</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>MT</i>	1	1.2	1	1.2	0	0
<i>PPI</i>	0	0	1	1.4	3	4.2

NB. The figures in the "100K" column stand for the frequencies per 100,000 words.

Let us look at the table from the viewpoint of style. First, the prose works have a

small number of examples with a small number of formal variation. Even among the mystical works there is a difference in use: *CU* uses *schortly to sey* and no equivalent adverbials while *JN* does not have any parenthetical construction but an adverb *sothly* instead. In Chaucer's works, *The Parson's Tale* and *The Tale of Melibee* have eight examples of *to speken* + prepositional phrase (PP), which is suitable for their didactic style.

Second, as for the alliterative verse, *GGK* has no example of parenthetical construction but an adverbial phrase *for sote*. *PPI* has only four examples, among which two have an alliterative phrase *trewely to telle*.

Finally, the rhyming verse has a large number of examples with a wide variety of forms. Especially, *Tr* and *The Book of Duchess (BD)* have frequent occurrences of parenthetical *seien* and *CA* of *speken* respectively.

What does this high frequency mean? In order to check how close the relationship between the parenthetical and the request of rhyme is, the position of the parenthetical construction in the line in Chaucer's verse and *CA* is surveyed as in Table 2.

Table 2. Positions of Parenthetical *Seien*, *Speken*, and *Tellen* in Line

	Chaucer			<i>CA</i>		
	Initial	I&F	Final	I	I&F	F
<i>seien</i>	16	1	53	0	1	12
<i>speken</i>	2	16	0	0	57	1
<i>tellen</i>	8	15	18	0	12	15

NB. The "Initial" includes examples in which a parenthetical follows a one-word conjunction or adverb such as *and*, *but*, *that*, *for*, *now* and *so*.

It is noteworthy that in Chaucer approximately 20 percent of the examples come to the "Initial" position, that is, they do not come to the final/rhyme position while no example can be seen in the position in *CA*. It might be because *CA* has shorter lines of eight syllables. In Chaucer, however, although many of the examples appear in 10-syllable works, five examples are found in the octosyllabic ones such as *BD* and *The House of Fame (HF)*. Therefore, it is safe to say that the parentheticals do not always occur by the request of rhyme.

3.2. Forms

Below are tabulated the adverbials, noun phrases (NPs), PPs, and object clauses which

co-occur with the parenthetical *seien*, *speken*, and *tellen* in Chaucer, *CA* and the other works. As a whole, parenthetical *speken* and *tellen* have a wider variety of forms. It is noteworthy that Chaucer uses the parentheticals more widely with such adverbs as *gostly*, *properly*, and *vulgarly*.

Table 3. Co-occurring Words, Phrases, and Clauses

<i>seien</i>	Chaucer only	<i>finally, platly, pleynly</i>
	Chaucer and <i>CA</i>	<i>shortly, soth(ly)</i>
	<i>CA</i> only	<i>in such a wise</i>
	Other works	<i>schortly</i>
<i>speken</i>	Chaucer only	<i>generally, gostly, in comune, properly, trewly, vulgarly</i>
	Chaucer and <i>CA</i>	<i>in specyal, NP, PP, pleyn(ly), short(ly)</i>
	<i>CA</i> only	<i>as in final, as it is nou befalle, finaly, forth, in general, in other wise/otherwise, in such a wise, in this matere, overmore</i>
	Other works	<i>faithly, PP</i>
<i>tellen</i>	Chaucer only	<i>aryght, as I may, as it was/is, at o word, at last, at shorte wordes, the conclusioun, forth, in short, in this case, NP, PP, properly, trewely</i>
	Chaucer and <i>CA</i>	<i>pleyn, short(ly), soth(ly)</i>
	<i>CA</i> only	<i>as olde bokes sein, NP/clause, overthis, plat, redely, thus, trowthe</i>
	Other works	<i>sooth, trewely</i>

NB. The “NP” excludes the noun phrases indicated in this table.

In order to see the frequencies of the expressions, it is reasonable to divide them semantically into groups. The expressions in Table 3 can be grouped into three: (1) SHORT, which consists of *short(ly)*, *in short*, *at shorte wordes*, and *at o word*; (2) SOTH, which consists of *soth(ly)*; and (3) the others.⁶⁾



Figure 1. Frequencies of SHORT and SOTH with Parenthetical *Seien*, *Speken*, and *Tellen* in Chaucer and CA

Figure 1 compares the frequencies between Chaucer and CA. According to the figure, SOTH, typified by the noun *soth*, is frequent in both, but the group does not co-occur with *speken*. The figure also indicates that SHORT, typified by the adverb *shortly*, appears more frequently in Chaucer. As for SHORT, there are five examples where two synonymous expressions accompany a parenthetical infinitive as in [10], which may be caused by the request of rhyme as well as by the intention of the speaker.

- [10] For *shortly for to tellen*, at o word,
 The Sowdan and the Cristen everichone
 Been al tohewe and stiked at the bord,
 But it were onoly dame Custance allone. (*MLT* 428-31)

As seen at the beginning of this section, Chaucer, differently from the other works, uses the adverbs *properly*, *vulgarly*, and *gostly*.⁷⁾ Among them, *gostly* is noteworthy.

- [11] The morwen com, and *gostly for to speke*,
 This Diomede is come unto Criseyde; (*Tr* 5.1030-31)

Quotation [11], from Book 5 of *Troilus and Criseyde*, describes the morning after Criseyde makes a crucial confession to Diomede: “I mene wel” (line 1004). Benson annotates the adverb as follows:

gostly: “Devoutly, solemnly, religiously,” hence “truly.” ... Or perhaps Chaucer means something like “figuratively,” drawing attention to the affected similitude of morning and Diomedé ... (1053).

As Y. Nakao⁸⁾ points out, the adverb also gives an interpretation that the narrator speaks Criseyde’s devout mind for her.

3.3. Functions in Chaucer

This section considers the functions of frequent phrases such as *soth to seye* in Chaucer. Let us look at [12], which is part of the Wife of Bath’s description in *The General Prologue (GP)*. There *soothly for to seye* is added to the proposition (or fact in this case) that she is *gat-tothed*.⁹⁾

[12] She was a worthy womman al hir lyve:
 Housbondes at chirche dore she hadde fyve,
 Withouten oother compaignye in youthe —
 But thereof nedeth nat to speke as nowthe.
 And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem;
 She hadde passed many a straunge strem;
 At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne,
 In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Coloigne.
 She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye.
Gat-tothed was she, *soothly for to seye*. (GP 459-68)

At the end of the quotation, the narrator changes the topic from her experience of pilgrimages to her appearance, specifically to her teeth. As Benson, referring to Curry, states, “in medieval physiognomy such teeth indicated an envious, irreverent, luxurious, bold, deceitful, faithless, and suspicious nature” (818-19) and at the same time, as Fisher and Allen point out, the “Wife ... claims that her spaced teeth help explain her sensuous nature” (19) in [13].

[13] He was, I trowe, twenty wynter oold,
 And I was fourty, if I shal seye sooth;
 But yet I hadde alwey a coltes tooth.
Gat-tothed I was, and that bicam me weel;

I hadde the prente of seinte Venus seel.
 As help me God, I was a lusty oon,
 And faire, and riche, and yong, and wel bigon,
 And trewely, as myne housbondes tolde me,
 I hadde the beste *quoniam* myghte be. (*WBP* 600-08)

Therefore, it is safe to say that the parenthetical gives the listeners some time to guess various things about her, as Masui (237), quoting Bennett, says:

These asseverative forms are extensively used by Chaucer as riming-tags, by means of which the poet intended to 'give (his) listeners time to absorb some fact or interesting detail, or to drive home the importance of a statement' (H. S. Bennett: *Chaucer and the 15th Century*, p. 85).

The phrase as one seen above is not necessarily used literally. When he speaks about the Merchant in *GP*, [14], the narrator insists that he does not know the name of the Merchant although he does.¹⁰⁾

[14] For sothe he was a worthy man with alle,
 But, *sooth to seyn*, I noot how men hym calle. (*GP* 283-84)

It seems that the parenthetical infinitive makes the audience think of the opposite in the same way the adverbial phrase *for sothe* in line 283 ironically emphasizes the Merchant's respectability.

3.4. Rivalry with Equivalent Expressions

Not only [14] but also [13] drives us to the question about the rivalry between the parenthetical infinitives and their equivalent expressions. Among others, this section concentrates the expressions related to the veracity of the proposition. Since there is no participial construction equivalent to the infinitive construction, this section treats sentence adverbs and adverbial clauses.

Concerning sentence adverbs, Y. Nakao (2011) provides statistical data of *sothly* and *trewely*.¹¹⁾ Among of them, he points out that they are used in the subjunctive mood or with modal auxiliaries in 45 of 192 instances (23%) as shown in Table 4 (120).¹²⁾

Table 4. Modality of Proposition with *Trewely* and *Sothly*

	Indicative	Subjunctive	Modal Auxiliaries
<i>trewely</i>	65	6	19
<i>sothly</i>	82	0	20

Moreover, those adverbs co-occur with the discourse marker *as I gesse*, as in [15], which restricts the range of the speaker's knowledge and therefore seems to tame the veracity of the proposition.

- [15] An horn he bar, the bawdryk was of grene;
 A forster was he, *sothly*, *as I gesse*. (GP 116-17)

On the other hand, the parenthetical infinitives almost always co-occur with propositions in the indicative mood (94%) as in Table 5.

Table 5. Modality of Proposition with Parenthetical Infinitive

Indicative	Subjunctive	Modal Auxiliaries
64	1	3

This means the infinitives have a stronger emphasizing function.

The adverbial *if*-clause, containing *seien*, has 10 examples in Chaucer, nine of which appear with a proposition in the indicative mood. *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* has an interesting example. Although being a speaker of colloquial English as Schlauch and GP¹³⁾ state, the Wife of Bath does not use the parenthetical infinitive¹⁴⁾ but *trewely* and the *if*-clause as shown in [16].

- [16] Now wol I tellen forth what happed me.
 I seye that in the feeldes walked we,
 Til *trewely* we hadde swich daliance,
 This clerk and I, that of my purveiance
 I spak to hym and seyde hym how that he,
 If I were wydwe, sholde wedde me.
 ...
 He was, I trowe, twenty wynter oold,
 And I was fourty, *if I shal seye sooth*;
 But yet I hadde alwey a coltes tooth.

Gat-tothed I was, and that bicam me weel;
 I hadde the prente of seinte Venus seel.
 As help me God, I was a lusty oon,
 And faire, and riche, and yong, and wel bigon,
 And *trewely*, as myne housbondes tolde me,
 I hadde the beste *quoniam* myghte be. (*WBP* 563-68, 600-08)

The adverb *trewely* is added to her confession that she engaged in flirtation with a “clerk”¹⁵⁾ and to the proposition that she has the best “*quoniam*”.¹⁶⁾ On the other hand, the *if*-clause co-occurs with the fact that there is an age difference of 20 years between them, which may well sound surprising for her listeners as well as herself.

Another example of the *if*-clause can be found in *The Canon’s Yeoman’s Prologue*.

[17] “In the suburbes of a toun,” quod he,
 “Lurkyng in hernes and in lanes blynde,
 Whereas thise robbours and thise theves by kynde
 Holden hir pryvee fereful residence,
 As they that dar nat shewen hir presence;
 So faren we, *if I shal seye the sothe*.” (*CYP* 657-62)

In [17] the Canon’s Yeoman, contrary to the guess of his listeners, discloses that he and his master, the alchemist, live in an impoverished and crime-infested area.

Tr also provides the illustration of the difference in the use of the expressions. All through the story, the parentheticals containing *soth(ly)* convey the minds of the characters faithfully and express the intention of Pandarus and the narrator to support Troilus and Criseyde’s love. However, in Book 4, where it is decided that she should leave him, Pandarus stops using the parentheticals, which indicates the end of his chatty narrative style and the limitations of his support to the couple.

In Books 4 and 5 the parentheticals are used to announce the events which are contrary to the hopes of the three main characters and the narrator: the deterioration of the war situation and Criseyde’s giving her heart to Diomedes as in [18] and [19].

[18] But in the laste shour, *soth for to telle*,
 The folk of Troie hemselven so mysledden
 That with the worse at nyght homward they fledden. (*Tr* 4.47-49)

- [19] And finaly, *the sothe for to seyne*,
 He refte hire of the grete of al hire peyne. (*Tr* 5.1035-36)

Taking into account Y. Nakao's finding that *trewely* is used to justify her sincerity and truthfulness in the Books (2011: 122), it is safe to say that the adverb and the parenthetical infinitive are used differently according to the contexts.

4. Summary

This article has mainly discussed the use of the parenthetical use of the absolute infinitive in Chaucer. Compared with the other works, he frequently uses *seien*, *speken*, and *tellen* in the construction with a variety of adverbials, especially with SOTH and SHORT.

Concerning the rivalry with its equivalent expressions, except for metrical factors, the following has been observed. The parenthetical infinitive construction more frequently co-occurs with a proposition in the indicative mood and therefore expresses higher veracity of the proposition than the sentence adverbs. It, however, sometimes gives the listeners time to guess various things including the opposite of the proposition. On the other hand, the adverbial *if*-clause containing *seien* is used with a large gap between realities and the listeners' odds. Thus, each type of expression seems to be chosen according to the context.

Notes

- * This is a revised version of a part of my paper read at the symposium of the 55th Summer Seminar of The English Research Association of Hiroshima held at Hiroshima University on the 9th August 2014. I wish to express my gratitude to the audience at the symposium.
- 1) There is a fluctuating use of the term "absolute". Denison (307), for example, uses the "absolute clauses" to denote "certain kinds of dependent minor clause, commonly used as an exclamatory question or echo response" without mentioning the "to tell the truth" type.
- 2) According to Mitchell (405), the term was first used by Callaway (169). He translates Mätzner's "unabhängige Infinitive" and uses the term to denote the infinitive phrase which is used parenthetically and indicates the intention of the speaker or writer.
- 3) This article follows Benson's (779) abbreviations of Chaucer's works.
- 4) All quotations from Chaucer are from Benson's edition. All emphasis is mine.
- 5) He explains that free adjuncts "are separated from the rest of the sentence by a pause, indicated by a comma" (114).
- 6) The collocation of *tellen* and *truth*, as in Present-day English, cannot be found in Chaucer while *CA* has three examples.
- 7) *Properly* is used by Prudence in *The Tale of Melibee* when she tries to reason her husband Melibee. According to Manly and Rickert, both the Hengwrt (Hg) and the Ellesmere (El) manuscripts (MSS),

which are thought to be the earliest, agree on the adverb. *Vulgarly* is used in *Tr* (4.1513), when Troilus talks to Criseyde about the money for their escape from Troy. *Tr* has 16 extant MSS, in six of which variant readings can be checked by the transcriptions made by Furnivall. Windeatt also gives us the information in more MSS. According to them, two of six MSS have variant readings: *largely* and *ferthermor*. In the same way, one of seven MSS has the variant reading of *gostly*: *shortly*.

- 8) In his comment on my paper at the symposium.
- 9) The adjective means “Having teeth set wide apart” (*Middle English Dictionary (MED)*, s.v. *gāt-tōthed* (adj.)). According to Manly and Rickert, both Hg and El agree on the adjective, although there are several variant readings in later MSS.
- 10) “For the author not to know a pilgrim’s name implies that he in fact has one” (Benson 810).
- 11) He looks into the position of the adverbs in the line, the aspect of the accompanying verbs, and the type of accompanying sentences, as well. Concerning those elements, there seems to be any crucial difference between the adverbs and the parenthetical infinitive.
- 12) This is an excerpt from his Table 3 (120).
- 13) “In felawshipe wel koude she laughe and carpe” (*GP* 474).
- 14) There is no example in *The Cook’s Tale*, *The Friar’s Tale*, *The Summoner’s Tale*, *The Physician’s Tale*, *The Prioress’s Tale*, and *The Tale of Sir Thopas (Thop)*, either. The Tales except *Thop*, which has two examples of *at a word* and one example of *pleynly*, do not have any examples of sentence adverbs or *if*-clauses, either, which may show their own narrative style. Another possible reason is that they are shorter in length.
- 15) A “student from Oxford who has left the university and gone to Bath” (de Weever 188).
- 16) “The female pudenda” (*MED*, s.v. *quoniam* (n.)).

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The Absolute Infinitive in Chaucer:
With Special Reference to Parenthetical Use
of *Seien*, *Speken*, and *Tellen*

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This article, after overviewing the use of the absolute infinitive in Chaucer, discusses some stylistic features of the parenthetical use of *seien*, *speken*, and *tellen*. For the purpose the data from Chaucer will be compared to those from his contemporaries. Following Visser, this article will use the term “absolute infinitive,” in a broad sense. He deals with infinitives which, used independently or absolutely, express, exclamations, imperatives, and observations of the speaker/writer or take the place of a finite form of the verb, etc. (§§983-99).

The comparison shows that Chaucer more frequently uses *seien*, *speken*, and *tellen* in the parenthetical use of the absolute infinitive with a variety of adverbials, especially with SOTH and SHORT.

Concerning the rivalry with its equivalent expressions, except for metrical factors, the parenthetical infinitive construction more frequently co-occurs with a proposition in the indicative mood and therefore expresses higher veracity of the proposition than the sentence adverbs. It, however, sometimes gives the listeners time to guess various things including the opposite of the proposition. On the other hand, the adverbial *if*-clause containing *seien* is used with a large gap between realities and the listeners' odds. Thus, each type of expression seems to be chosen according to the context.