Cogent Arts & Humanities

ISSN: 2331-1983 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/oaah20

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To cite this article: Oğulcan Çelik (2026) From traditional piety to protestant expression: formulaic religious language in Kentish PCC Wills and the Tudor reformations, 1509–1603, Cogent Arts & Humanities, 13:1, 2762601, DOI: 10.1080/23311983.2026.2762601

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2026.2762601

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Published online: 23 Nov 2026.

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COGENT ARTS & HUMANITIES
2026, VOL. 13, NO. 1, 2762601
https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2026.2762601

HISTORY | RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

From traditional piety to protestant expression: formulaic religious language in Kentish PCC Wills and the Tudor reformations, 1509–1603

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ABSTRACT

This article examines formulaic religious language in 1233 Kentish Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills from 1509 to 1603. It investigates how testamentary expression changed across Henrician reform, Edwardian Protestantisation, Marian restoration and the Elizabethan settlement. The method combines interpretive classification with descriptive counts and close reading of preambles, committals of the soul, verbs, nouns and references to royal authority. These features are examined as evidence of religious expression shaped by legal and scribal conventions, rather than as direct measures of personal piety. Traditional formulae declined unevenly under Henry VIII and more sharply under Edward VI, recovered in the later Marian years, and persisted as a minority pattern under Elizabeth I. The article argues that the decline of traditional wording must be distinguished from the adoption of explicitly Protestant expression, with ambiguous and mixed formulations considered separately. By following a socially and jurisdictionally selective corpus across four reigns, the study clarifies the relationship between religious policy and documentary language. It contributes to debates about Protestantisation and demonstrates the importance of reading multiple formulaic elements together when using wills as evidence of religious change.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 3 July 2026
Revised 23 September 2026
Accepted 4 November 2026

KEYWORDS
Kent; Tudor Wills; Prerogative Court of Canterbury; testamentary formulae; protestant language; confessional expression

SUBJECTS
Religion; History; Literature

1. Introduction

The English Reformation was a long process of political and religious change that affected the lived religion and confessional expression of laymen in the sixteenth century. Royal authority over the Church, doctrine, worship and personal piety were all redefined more than once throughout the Tudor dynasty. Henry VIII's break with Rome, Edward VI's Protestant reforms under the protectorates of the Dukes of Somerset and Northumberland, Mary I's Catholic restoration and Elizabeth I's settlement created a variety of religious settings as well as upheavals. These changes also affected the phrases and elements used in wills to speak of the soul, death, salvation, obedience and religious identity. How far official religion entered lay testamentary language is, therefore, a central question for this article. I approach it through a defined group of Kentish PCC wills and ask how Protestant wording appeared and continued in the wills of the gentry and middling testators represented in this corpus between 1509 and 1603. Kent is a significant county for such a study. Canterbury gave the county a central place in the ecclesiastical geography of England, while Kent's coastal position and continental links made it open to reformist contact (Collinson & Craig, 1998; Dickens, 1978, pp. 187–222; MacCulloch, 1996, pp. 80–110). The will is also a useful but difficult source. It is a legal record of property, yet it often contains religious formulae about death, the soul, salvation and devotion. These formulae cannot be treated as simple statements of belief. Scribes, legal custom, clerical influence, family expectation and local practice could all shape the wording, religious vocabulary and confessional expression of testators.

The scope of the article is therefore deliberately limited. The evidence presented in this article is from the Prerogative Court of Canterbury and not the full surviving probate record for Kent. They are

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therefore especially useful for studying the religious language of gentry and middling testators represented in the PCC corpus. Wills proved in the Archdeaconry Court of Canterbury, and the Consistory Court of Canterbury would be necessary for a fuller reconstruction of local and lower-status testamentary religion. The present article does not claim to recover the religious beliefs or attitudes of the whole county. The question is more limited: what happened to religious vocabulary inside a large Kentish PCC corpus as the same county passed through the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I. The central problem of the article is not whether Kent simply became Protestant, but how far the religious language of will-making changed as official religion was repeatedly altered across the Tudor period. By following evidence from the wills, this article examines how religious vocabulary was retained, adapted, abandoned and revived across four Tudor regimes within a defined Kentish PCC corpus.

The dataset used here comes from my previous research, but the present article narrows that material to Kent. My earlier study examined 1,997 Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills from 1509 to 1553, collected from nineteen counties, in order to trace changes in testamentary religious language among gentry and middling testators during the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI. It argued that the evidence of preambles and committals demonstrates a movement from a predominantly traditional religious culture towards Protestant expression by 1553. My subsequent study extended the chronological framework to the reigns of Mary I and Elizabeth I, analysing 1,624 PCC wills from Kent and Gloucestershire between 1553 and 1603. It categorised wills as Protestant, Traditional/Catholic, Ambiguous and Crypto-Protestant/Catholic, while also expanding the methodological focus beyond committals to include preambles, verbs, nouns, references to the monarch, the title 'Defender of the Faith' and references to royal ecclesiastical supremacy. The present article narrows that broader work to the Kentish PCC corpus and follows this defined body of evidence across the reigns of the four Tudor monarchs central to the English Reformation. It analyses 1,233 Kentish PCC wills: 236 from the reign of Henry VIII, 62 from Edward VI, 81 from Mary I and 854 from Elizabeth I. By bringing the Henrician, Edwardian, Marian and Elizabethan evidence together, the article asks how far religious vocabulary within this Kentish PCC corpus reflects the growth, disruption, adaptation and wider visibility of Protestant testamentary expression across the Tudor century.

It also asks whether the language of wills merely followed official religious policy or whether it preserves more complex evidence of adaptation, hesitation, persistence and mixed confessional expression. The use of wills as evidence for religious belief has generated considerable debate. The debate has often centred on preambles and committals, and on whether such formulae can tell us anything about personal piety. They can, but only if they are handled with care. A will was a legal document, and its religious wording was rarely the product of one isolated voice. A will may be influenced and affected by scribes, clerics, family members and local habits. One phrase or element in a will may not prove what a testator believed or his or her personal piety. Still, large numbers of wills may demonstrate which words, elements and formulae were used and which of them became more or less common. For this reason, the article does not stop at the entity to which the soul was commended, as many scholars have discussed. It also considers preambles, verbs, nouns, references to monarchs, the titles Supreme Head and Defender of the Faith, omissions and repeated formulae to follow the language of death, salvation, monarchy and belief in the Kentish PCC corpus.

The main argument presented in the article is that the Kentish PCC wills illustrate a movement from older Catholic formulae towards Protestant confessional expression, but this movement was gradual and uneven during the regimes of four Tudor monarchs. This movement demonstrates that changes in official religious policy did not produce an immediate or uniform replacement of testamentary language: gentry and middling testators in the PCC records, working within legal and scribal forms, continued to use, adapt or avoid inherited formulae as political and ecclesiastical conditions changed. Under Henry VIII, traditional piety remained prominent, though the break with Rome and the assertion of royal supremacy altered conventional will-writing. Edward VI's reign made Protestant wording and confessional expression much more visible, especially in committals where Mary and the saints were left out and the soul was bequeathed to God, Jesus Christ, or the Holy Trinity. The omission of Mary and the saints alone, however, is insufficient to establish Protestant expression; such wording must be assessed alongside the other formulaic elements of the will. The Marian evidence is less straightforward than a simple return to Catholic language would suggest. The Marian Kentish wills contain traditional, ambiguous and Protestant elements, and this mixture may suggest caution, conformity and the persistence of Edwardian habits

after the Catholic restoration of Mary I. Under Elizabeth I, Protestant vocabulary became more common, but older and uncertain forms did not disappear completely. Some wills adopted Protestant language and expression, some kept older Catholic formulae and some used words that were cautious or mixed. In this sense, the PCC wills were not merely legal instruments. They were also documents in which religious change could be expressed, qualified, or left uncertain. The main result of the article is therefore a change in balance rather than a complete replacement of one religious language by another: Protestant formulae became increasingly visible, especially under Edward VI and again under Elizabeth I, but older Catholic forms continued to survive, returned strongly in the later Marian years, and remained present in reduced or cautious forms after the Elizabethan settlement. The Kentish evidence therefore complicates any interpretation of Protestantisation that treats the decline of traditional formulae as equivalent to the adoption of explicitly Protestant expression.

2. Historiography: reformation, Kent, testamentary evidence and recent approaches to Wills

The English Reformation and the change of religion in England have been discussed by many historians, and the debate has long divided them. One of the early interpretations was provided by A. G. Dickens, who presented the Reformation as a movement with real support among some groups in England before and during the official reform. In this view, Protestantism was not only imposed by the crown but also connected to existing religious, intellectual and social conditions (Dickens, 1978, 1987, pp. 187–222). This interpretation is significant for this article because the Kentish PCC evidence does demonstrate a decline in traditional formulae and a gradual increase in Protestant expression across the Tudor period. Revisionist historians challenged this view by emphasising the strength of late medieval religion. Christopher Haigh, J. J. Scarisbrick and Eamon Duffy argued that traditional religion remained powerful in parish life and that the Reformation was not immediately or equally accepted everywhere (Duffy, 2005, pp. 505–506; Haigh, 1993; Scarisbrick, 1984). This approach is also useful for this article because traditional language did not suddenly disappear from Kentish PCC wills. When wills continued to mention Mary, the saints, or the company of heaven, such phrases should not be dismissed simply and be treated as meaningless survival of older formulae. They also show that traditional religious culture continued to survive.

Peter Marshall, Diarmaid MacCulloch and Ethan Shagan, Post-revisionist historians, have moved beyond a simple contrast between Protestant success and Catholic survival. Their works demonstrate that responses to Reformation cannot be simply reduced to acceptance or rejection since uncertainty, resistance, obedience and caution also shaped religious change (MacCulloch, 1996; Marshall, 2012; Shagan, 2003). Wills were written in these changing conditions in England. Some followed the official religious language of the day; others kept older formulae or chose wording that was mixed and safer.

Recent scholarship has moved beyond confessional labels to study personal piety and expression. Instead of focusing on the assessment of certain phrases or elements to track the evidence for the change of personal piety or expression, they focused on lived religion and practices. Peter Marshall, in his recent work, discusses that the English Reformation was shaped by religious culture, social experience and politics (Marshall, 2017). Ryrie's work draws attention to prayer, worship, household devotion and the ordinary practices through which Protestant religion was lived and expressed (Ryrie, 2013). Shagan argues that belief should not be treated as a simple category that can be easily traced or recovered from historical sources and underscores that statements, especially during the English Reformation, could be shaped by political pressure (Shagan, 2018). Recent scholarship on the Reformation has demonstrated that religious change was neither linear nor uniform. It involved conflict, adaptation, forgetting, remembering and reshaping traditional practices (Cummings et al., 2020; Walsham et al., 2020). This perspective is significant for this article since it cautions against reading wills as direct evidence of personal piety. The aim is not to determine the personal piety of the testators but how religious expression changed over time.

Kent has a particular importance for this article due to its religious geography and the connections to reformist networks. As the county of Canterbury, it was close to the centre of English ecclesiastical life. Its ports, its proximity to the Continent and its connections with reformist networks also made it a strong regional case for studying Protestant ideas. Earlier historians often described Kent as

comparatively receptive to reform. The evidence, however, does not support a neat or immediate Protestantisation but a process. My earlier work on Henrician and Edwardian wills suggested that Kent did not simply abandon traditional forms under Henry VIII. A clearer movement towards Protestant expression became visible after the mid-1530s and especially under Edward VI (Çelik, 2019). This article extends that question across the full Tudor period by adding Marian and Elizabethan evidence and adopting a new methodology. This allows examination of the Kentish PCC corpus through reform, reversal, restoration and settlement. The regional importance of Kent can also be strengthened through the work of Michael Zell and Peter Clark. Zell's study of early modern Kent emphasises the county's coastal position and its exposure to continental religious influences, especially through its ports, which made Kent more open to reformist ideas (Zell, 2000, p. 183). Clark's work on popular protest and disturbance in Kent also shows that the county cannot be treated as a passive recipient of religious policy, since local responses to religious and political change could take organised and disruptive forms (Clark, 1976, pp. 365–82). This makes Kent a useful regional case for examining both Protestant development and the survival of conflict, caution and ambiguity in testamentary language. Recent work on locality, memory and sacred space also qualifies how regional evidence should be interpreted.

Alexandra Walsham's work on religion, landscape, memory and the afterlives of sacred material culture shows that religious change was embedded in places, objects, households and inherited practices, rather than unfolding evenly across a county or kingdom (Walsham, 2011, 2016, 2017). Work on the early modern parish church similarly underlines the importance of local institutions, burial space, communal worship and parish identity (Spicer, 2016). This matters because Kent was not a single religious unit. Canterbury, the coastal towns, inland parishes and the Weald may have produced different local experiences. The PCC corpus gives evidence for a particular body of Kentish testators. It does not remove the need for parish accounts, local probate records and other evidence where such comparison is possible. Clive Burgess warned that late medieval wills often followed pious conventions and should not be read too directly as evidence of the testator's personal piety (Burgess, 1987, pp. 837–858; 1990). This article responds to that caution by examining repeated patterns across the Kentish PCC corpus for changes in confessional expression and religious vocabulary.

The question of testamentary 'voice' is especially important here. Susan E. James's study of Tudor wills has shown that wills could be texts of authority, influence, self-representation and material culture, particularly in relation to women's testamentary agency (James, 2016). This does not mean, however, that wills give direct access to personal piety or personal intention. The wording of a will could reflect the language of clerks, scriveners, clergy, family members, legal convention, or local habit as much as the testator's own preferred phrasing. In this article, therefore, 'voice' is used in a restricted sense. It refers to the religious language preserved in the document, not to autobiography or to the testator's inner life. Despite these problems, many historians have shown that wills remain valuable for studying religious change. A. G. Dickens made statistical use of wills in order to trace the early spread of Protestantism. His separation of traditional wills, which commend the soul to the company of saints, from Protestant wills, which direct the soul to God or Christ, became a model for later work (Dickens, 1987, pp. 187–222). Michael Zell also used religious preambles to distinguish Catholic, non-traditional and explicitly Protestant forms (Zell, 1977, p. 246), while Martin Heale connected traditional preambles with committals to God, the Blessed Virgin and the company of heaven (Heale, 2016, p. 366). These studies are useful because they show that formulae have meaning when they are read comparatively, not as isolated lines. Caroline Litzenberger's work on Gloucestershire is especially important for this article because it brought regional religious history together with the classification of committals. She divided wills into Traditional, Ambiguous and Protestant categories and included religious bequests in her analysis (Litzenberger, 1997, p. 172). Her study is valuable not only because it illustrates the importance of regional/local evidence, but also because it shows that lay responses to religious change were varied. Litzenberger emphasised that the laity experienced repeated upheavals and changes in religion, and that their responses to change depended on personal experience, knowledge, preferences and circumstances (Litzenberger, 1997, p. 2). This point is central here, since Tudor Kentish testators lived through several official religious regimes between 1509 and 1603. Their

wills may therefore reveal not only acceptance or rejection, but also hesitation, adaptation and caution.

Recent studies of wills, gender, probate records and material culture strengthen this caution. A will should not be reduced to its preamble or to the committal of the soul. Burial instructions, funeral provisions, objects, gifts to churches and clergy, charitable bequests, household goods, gifts to kin and bequests to the poor may all carry religious and social meanings. Stephanie Appleton's study of Stratford-upon-Avon shows that wills were also shaped by kinship, property, gender and local community (Appleton, 2017). The Material Culture of Wills project likewise points to objects and bequests as evidence for memory, material life and social identity (Material Culture of Wills Project, 2024). Elizabeth DeBold's work on emotions and post-mortem strategies in seventeenth-century wills shows that bequests could carry familial and affective meanings that formulaic language alone cannot capture (DeBold, 2024). These studies mark the limits of the present article. A fuller study of burial wishes, charitable gifts, parish contexts and individual bequests would deepen, and sometimes complicate, the categories used here. Claire Cross's work on Leeds and Hull is also useful because it accepts the limits of wills but still treats them as one of the fullest sources for tracing local religious trends (Cross, 1982, p. 230). John Craig and Caroline Litzenberger's study of William Tracy's testament shows that wills could even enter religious controversy and propaganda (Craig & Litzenberger, 1993, pp. 415–431). The language of wills therefore needs to be taken seriously, but not read too quickly.

3. Sources and methodology

This study uses a corpus of 1,233 Kentish PCC wills preserved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury records, PROB 11, held at The National Archives. The material is drawn from two larger datasets compiled for my earlier research. The first dataset examined wills from the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI, while the second focused on the reigns of Mary I and Elizabeth I (Çelik, 2019, 2026a, 2026c). For the purposes of this article, the evidence has been narrowed to Kent in order to trace changes in Protestant testamentary expression across the whole Tudor Reformation. The wills used in this article are registered copies from the PCC series. They are valuable because they offer a substantial and chronologically continuous body of evidence through which changes in religious vocabulary and testamentary formulae can be examined.

A methodological clarification is necessary concerning the representativeness of the corpus. The wills examined here are all Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills. They therefore do not represent all surviving Kentish wills or all levels of Kentish society. PCC probate generally involved individuals with property of a certain value, goods in more than one jurisdiction, or social and economic circumstances that brought their wills before a higher probate court. As a result, the corpus is weighted towards gentry and middling testators represented in the PCC records. This makes the evidence valuable for examining the religious language of these groups, but it also limits what can be claimed about Kent as a whole.

The absence of the Archdeaconry Court of Canterbury and the Consistory Court of Canterbury wills is a limitation of this article. I have not included those records because this article is a PCC corpus study based on registered PROB 11 wills. ADC and CCC material would provide a broader local comparison and would include testators whose property, status and parish connections were not the same as those represented in the PCC. Such material would allow testing whether the patterns found here also appeared among more local and lower-status sections of Kentish society. This limitation does not undermine the validity of the interpretive analysis of the PCC evidence, since the aim of the article is specific to a certain group of testators: the gentry and the middling classes.

The term 'voice' needs particular attention. The wording of a will cannot automatically be taken as the testator's direct account without mediation. Conventionally, wills were written by clergy, and the phrases used in a will may reflect legal convention, local habit, scribal formula, family expectation, or the religious conditions under which the will was produced as much as the personal belief of the individual testator. Therefore, the article treats all wills as mediated legal and religious documents and interprets repeated formulae as evidence for documentary religious language rather than as direct evidence of individual authorship or personal piety. When the same formulae recur in many wills and change over

time, they can indicate which kinds of religious expression were available, acceptable, or preferred among the groups represented in the PCC corpus.

The article uses classification of certain elements and close reading. Each will is read through recurring religious and political formulae, but the committal of the soul is not used alone. The elements such as the preambles, the verbs and nouns in the committal, the acknowledgement of the monarch, the titles Supreme Head and Defender of the Faith, and the presence or absence of these titles were also considered and included in the analysis. This is necessary because a single phrase cannot define the religious character of a will, even though some scholars have used a single element to track evidence of personal piety. A committal to God may point in a Protestant direction, but it may also be a legal form, a scribal habit, or a cautious wording. The reading becomes stronger only when several elements in the same will point in the same direction.

The categories used here classify selected formulae only; they do not classify the whole religious identity of each testator. A will that appears Protestant in its committal may still include conservative burial wishes, traditional charitable patterns, or bequests that complicate the reading. In the same way, a will with conventional or ambiguous formulae may contain other details that point towards reformist priorities. Bequests to parish churches, monasteries, clergy, lights, obits, funeral arrangements, burial instructions, prayers for the dead, charitable gifts and gifts to the poor may all carry religious meaning. These features are not treated as unimportant. They are simply outside the main interpretive framework of this article. The chronological distribution of the corpus is shown in Table 1.

As Table 2 shows, the gender distribution also defines the character of the corpus. The Kentish PCC material is overwhelmingly male: 1,152 of the 1,233 wills belong to men, while 81 belong to women. The major difference between the male and female voices matters. The corpus cannot support a balanced comparison of male and female testamentary expression in Kent. It mainly records the religious language of male testators represented in the PCC, although the smaller group of women's wills remains important. The findings should therefore be read as evidence for formulaic religious language in a socially and gender-selective PCC corpus, not as a complete reconstruction of belief in Kent.

As Table 3 indicates, the geographical distribution is presented in broad regional groups rather than as a full parish-by-parish list. The compiled corpus contains 763 distinct place or residence entries as recorded in the research corpus. These entries include major Kentish centres, smaller parishes, manors, hamlets and variant or abbreviated place-name forms. For this reason, a large part of the corpus is grouped here as smaller and dispersed Kentish parishes and residences rather than forced into a small number of modern regional categories.

The table shows that the corpus is not limited to Canterbury or to a single part of Kent. It includes wills connected with North Kent, the Medway region, London-facing Kent, the Weald, West Kent, coastal Kent, the Cinque Ports, East Kent, Canterbury and its immediate environs, as well as many smaller Kentish communities. This strengthens the regional value of the PCC corpus while also requiring caution about local variation. The evidence should therefore be understood as a broad Kentish PCC corpus, not as a complete parish-by-parish reconstruction of religious change across the county.

Table 1. Number of Kentish PCC Wills.

Monarch	Reign	Number of Kentish Wills
Henry VIII	1509–1547	236
Edward VI	1547–1553	62
Mary I	1553–1558	81
Elizabeth I	1558–1603	854
Total	1509–1603	**1,233**

The bold value indicates the total number of Kentish PCC wills in the sample.

Table 2. Gender distribution of Kentish PCC testators, 1509–1603.

Gender	Number of Wills	Percentage
Male	1,152	93.4%
Female	81	6.6%
Total	**1,233**	**100%**

The bold values indicate the total number of wills and the corresponding total percentage.

Table 3. Broad geographical distribution of Kentish PCC testators.

Broad geographical group	Number of Wills	Percentage
Smaller and dispersed Kentish parishes and residences	689	55.9%
North Kent, Medway and London-facing Kent	177	14.4%
The Kentish Weald	170	13.8%
West Kent, Maidstone, Tonbridge and Sevenoaks area	134	10.9%
Coastal Kent, Cinque Ports and East Kent	45	3.6%
Canterbury and immediate environs	18	1.5%
Total	**1,233**	**100%**

The bold values indicate the total number of wills and the corresponding total percentage.

The profession, social status and ecclesiastical descriptors preserved in the Kentish PCC corpus further support its socially selective character. Where such descriptors are recorded, they point mainly to gentry, middling, ecclesiastical, property-holding and socially visible testators. The most frequent identifiable descriptors are yeoman, esquire, gentleman, clerk or cleric, knight, husbandman and priest or other ecclesiastical office. These terms make up most of the occupational and status vocabulary that can be identified in the corpus. This point should be interpreted carefully. It does not mean that the whole corpus can be assigned a precise profession or social status. Rather, it means that, among the wills where such descriptors are preserved, the identifiable vocabulary points mainly to socially and economically visible groups. This supports the description of the Kentish PCC corpus as weighted towards gentry and middling testators, while also confirming that it should not be treated as a complete occupational or social cross-section of Kentish society.

Taken together, the corpus's chronological, gendered, geographical and social features clarify both the value and the limits of the evidence. The 1,233 Kentish PCC wills form a substantial and continuous body of material through which changes in formulaic religious language can be traced across the Tudor period. At the same time, the corpus is socially, jurisdictionally and gender selective. It is weighted towards male, gentry, middling, property-holding, ecclesiastical and socially visible testators whose wills entered the PCC and it does not represent all Kentish will-makers. The following analysis, therefore, treats the corpus as evidence for religious vocabulary and testamentary expression within a defined Kentish PCC body of wills, not as a complete reconstruction of religious belief across Kentish society. The contribution of this method lies in reading testamentary formulae cumulatively. This article does not treat any single element – the committal of the soul, the preamble, verbs, nouns, monarch references, or the titles Supreme Head and Defender of the Faith – as decisive on its own, even though some scholars have tracked personal piety through single elements. Instead, it reads these elements together in order to trace broader patterns of formulaic religious expression.

3.1. Categorisation of the entity in the committal

One of the elements utilised in this article is the entity to whom the testator entrusts the soul. Earlier studies often focused on this part of the will because it directly concerns salvation and the afterlife. This article follows the method developed in my earlier study by treating the committal as important but not sufficient on its own (Çelik, 2026a). Table 4 demonstrates the use of entities in wills along with possible interpretation.

The category of Crypto-Protestant/Catholic is especially important for the Marian and Elizabethan periods. It was used for wills that bring together elements which do not sit easily in one confessional category. Such wording may reflect caution, transition, scribal habit, or the difficulty of writing under changing political and religious regimes due to suppression. It may or may not be evidence of a hidden belief by itself. It is a way of identifying mixed or careful formulaic language within the corpus (Çelik, 2026a). The entity combinations recorded in the Kentish corpus illustrate these distinctions. Trinitarian wording names the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, whereas traditional intercessory wording includes God, the Virgin Mary and the company of heaven. The Marian material also contains the combination of the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary and the Holy Company of Heaven, bringing these forms together within the same committal. Such combinations explain why individual elements cannot always be assigned a straightforward confessional meaning. These examples reproduce the entity

Table 4. Categorisation of the entity.

Entity	Possible formulaic implication	Rationale
God alone	Indicative of Protestant Formulaic Language	Suggests a direct relationship with God without intercessors
Jesus Christ alone	Indicative of Protestant Formulaic Language	Emphasises Christ-centred salvation.
Holy Trinity	Indicative of Protestant Formulaic Language unless combined with Mary/Saints	Protestant when no intercessory figures are included.
God, Mary and Saints	Indicative of Traditional/Catholic Formulaic Language	Indicates Marian and saintly intercession.
Company of Heaven	Indicative of Traditional/Catholic Formulaic Language	Strongly associated with traditional Catholic phrasing.
Mixed use of entities	Indicative of Ambiguous or Crypto-Protestant/Catholic Formulaic Language	Depends on the combination, chronology and reigning monarch.

Table 5. Categorisation of preambles.

Preamble	Possible formulaic implication
In the Name of God Amen	No clear implication on its own
In Dei Nomine Amen	No clear implication on its own
Trinitarian Formula: In the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost	Indicative of Protestant formulaic language
This is the Last Will and Testament / This is the Last Will / The Testament	No clear implication on its own
Omission of Preamble	No clear implication on its own
In the Name of Jesus Christ Amen / God and Jesus Christ Amen	Indicative of Protestant formulaic language
Memorandum	Indicative of Traditional/Catholic formulaic language (Recorded in Traditional and Ambiguous wills)
Be It Known Unto All Men / Imprimis / nuncupative formulae	No clear implication on its own

combinations recorded in the research tables rather than complete transcriptions of individual committals.

3.2. Preambles

In this article, 'preamble' refers to the opening formula of the will, such as In the Name of God Amen or In Dei Nomine Amen, rather than the committal of the soul. This distinction is important because earlier scholarship sometimes used 'preamble' to refer to what this study calls the committal. My earlier method separates the two in order to avoid terminological confusion. The following preambular forms are examined: In the Name of God Amen, In Dei Nomine Amen, Trinitarian formulae, This is the Last Will and Testament, omission of preambles, In the Name of Jesus Christ Amen, God and Jesus Christ Amen, Memorandum, Be It Known Unto All Men, Imprimis and nuncupative formulae. My earlier research concluded that many preambles were used across confessional lines and therefore do not automatically indicate personal piety. Trinitarian formulae and explicitly Christ-centred openings were examined for their possible association with Protestant expression in my earlier research (Çelik, 2026a). The proposed association of Memorandum with traditional language arose from its distribution among the classified wills. In the Elizabethan Kentish sample, it appeared in three Traditional and seven Ambiguous wills, but in none classified as Protestant (Çelik, 2026a, 2026c, Table 94). This distribution explains the earlier interpretation, although the predominance of Ambiguous cases means that Memorandum cannot independently establish a Catholic association. Table 5 demonstrates preambular forms used in wills.

3.3. Verbs in the committal

The article also analyses the verbs used when the testator commends or bequeaths the soul. This is one of the methodological innovations developed in my earlier research (Çelik, 2026a). Verbs are not read only as legal or fixed formulae. They are also examined as part of the formulaic vocabulary through which wills represented death, salvation and the committal of the soul. The verbs identified in the dataset are bequeath, commend, give, commit, yield, will, recommend, beseech and betake. Table 6 demonstrates the categorisation of verbs below.

Table 6. Categorisation of verbs.

Verb	Possible formulaic implication
Bequeath	No clear implication on its own
Recommend	Possibly indicative of Protestant formulaic language
Give	No clear implication on its own
Commit	No clear implication on its own
Will	Indicative of Protestant formulaic language
Commend	Indicative of Protestant formulaic language
Yield	Indicative of Protestant formulaic language
Betake	No clear implication on its own
Beseech	Indicative of Protestant formulaic language

Table 7. Categorisation of nouns.

Noun	Possible formulaic implication
Saviour	Indicative of Protestant formulaic language
Redeemer	Indicative of Protestant formulaic language
Creator	Possibly indicative of Protestant formulaic language
Maker	Possibly indicative of Protestant formulaic language
Sanctifier	Indicative of Protestant formulaic language
Mediator	Indicative of Protestant formulaic language

These verbs are not used on their own to identify and classify a will. They are read together with the entity to which the soul is directed, the nouns and verbs used in the formula, the preamble, acknowledgement of monarchs and the titles. For example, 'commend' or 'yield' carries more Protestant leaning when the soul is bequeathed to Christ or to God alone.

3.4. Nouns in the committal

The nouns used with God or Christ are also examined, since they can carry theological meaning. In my earlier research, Creator, Saviour, Maker, Redeemer, Sanctifier and Mediator appeared as important nouns in the committal formulae. 'Saviour' and 'Redeemer' are especially important because they emphasise salvation through Christ. This interpretation is also supported by earlier discussions of evangelical language in wills. Spufford associated the appearance of 'Redeemer' in wills with areas affected by evangelical preaching or the enforcement of royal religious policy, while Burgess also treated the increasing appearance of such terms as potentially connected to Reformation ideas (Burgess, 1990; Spufford, 1974). For this reason, the nouns 'Saviour' and 'Redeemer' are not treated as neutral vocabulary in this article, although they are still read alongside the entity, preamble and wider formula of each will. 'Sanctifier' and 'Mediator' are also treated as Protestant because they suggest a direct theological relationship between God, Christ, the Holy Spirit and the believer. Table 7 demonstrates the categorisation of nouns along with possible formulaic implications.

As with verbs, nouns are read cumulatively. Their interpretive value increases when they appear with other Protestant elements, such as the absence of Mary and the saints, Christ-centred salvation, or acknowledgement of royal supremacy under Protestant rule.

3.5. Royal supremacy, Defender of the Faith and acknowledgement of monarchs

The article also examines political and ecclesiastical language in the wills. The title Supreme Head of the Church of England is examined as a marker of royal ecclesiastical authority following Henry VIII's break with Rome and its continuation under Edward VI. Its use does not, on its own, establish Protestant doctrinal commitment, particularly under Henry VIII. The method treats references to this title as potentially significant evidence of acceptance of royal ecclesiastical supremacy (Çelik, 2026a, 2026b). However, the meaning of such references depends on context. Some may reflect formulaic dating clauses or scribal practice rather than personal religious conviction.

The title Defender of the Faith, however, is more complicated. Although originally associated with Henry VIII's defence of Catholic orthodoxy against Luther, it continued to be used by later Tudor monarchs. My earlier research, therefore, treats the title cautiously (Çelik, 2026a, 2026b). Its presence under Elizabeth I may

carry Protestant implications, but its presence or omission is not always a direct indicator of religious identity. Table 8 demonstrates the use of Defender of the Faith along with possible formulaic implications.

References to the monarch are also analysed. Full acknowledgement of the monarch may indicate conformity to the political-religious regime, especially under Elizabeth I, but omission does not automatically indicate resistance. My earlier research concludes that acknowledgement and omission may reflect local attitudes towards monarchy as much as religious identity (Çelik, 2026a, 2026b). Table 9 demonstrates the Use of the Acknowledgement of Monarchs along with possible formulaic implications.

3.6. Analytical procedure and categorisation of wills

The analysis proceeds in three stages. The wills are first organised chronologically by reign. For the Henrician and Edwardian material, the earlier study classified wills through their preambles and committals as Traditional, Protestant, Ambiguous, or Prot/Cat (Çelik, 2019). The combination 'God, Mary and Saints' was treated as Traditional, while committals to God alone, Jesus Christ, or the Holy Trinity were classified as Protestant. Combinations such as 'God and Mary', 'God and the Saints' and 'God, Jesus Christ, Mary and Saints' were placed in the Ambiguous category. These examples illustrate the classification of combinations of entities rather than establish the religious allegiance of individual testators. The later study expanded the criteria to include additional indicators, so comparisons across the two datasets require attention to this methodological difference.

For the Marian and Elizabethan material, the initial classification developed in my earlier research drew on the entities named in the committal, references to the title 'Supreme Head' and the nouns 'Saviour' and 'Redeemer'. These indicators were considered together, with classification based on the balance of features interpreted as Catholic or Protestant, including the presence or absence of particular expressions (Çelik, 2026a, 2026c).

References to Mary, the saints and the company of heaven were interpreted as evidence of traditional intercessory language, whereas committals to God, Jesus Christ, or the Holy Trinity without intercessors were considered possible Protestant indicators. However, the classification of a whole will did not necessarily follow the interpretation of its committal alone. In the earlier research, for example, a committal to God alone could be classified as Catholic when neither the title 'Supreme Head' nor the nouns 'Saviour' or 'Redeemer' appeared. In that framework, these absences were interpreted as two Catholic indicators outweighing one Protestant indicator. The Traditional/Catholic category therefore includes wills classified through this combination of criteria, as well as those containing explicit intercessory language. These are interpretive classifications of testamentary wording rather than definitive identifications of a testator's personal piety.

The chronological tables report Protestant, Traditional and Ambiguous wills. Cases discussed as Crypto-Protestant or Crypto-Catholic were incorporated into these three categories rather than presented as a separate numerical category. Preambles, verbs, additional nouns, the title 'Defender of the Faith' and acknowledgements of the monarch were then examined in relation to the initial classifications to assess their possible association with particular forms of religious expression (Çelik, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

Table 8. Use of defender of the faith.

Use of defender of the faith	Possible formulaic implication
Presence in Marian Regime	No clear implication on its own
Presence in Elizabethan Regime	Indicative of Protestant formulaic language
Omission in Marian Regime	No clear implication on its own
Omission in Elizabethan Regime	No clear implication on its own

Table 9. Use of acknowledgement of monarchs.

Acknowledgement of monarch	Possible formulaic implication
Presence in Marian Regime	No clear implication on its own
Presence in Elizabethan Regime	Indicative of Protestant formulaic language
Omission in Marian Regime	No clear implication on its own
Omission in Elizabethan Regime	No clear implication on its own

4. Confessional expression in Kentish PCC wills across Tudor reformations

This section examines changes in formulaic religious expression within the Kentish PCC corpus across the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I. The figures show the proportions of wills classified as Traditional/Catholic according to the criteria outlined above. A decline in this category does not by itself establish a corresponding increase in Protestant wills, since the remaining wills also include those classified as Ambiguous. The results are therefore interpreted through the classification of the wills and the expressions they contain, within the religious and political context of each reign.

4.1. Henry VIII

Under Henry VIII, reform began primarily as a matter of jurisdiction and royal authority rather than a complete Protestant transformation of doctrine. The break with Rome was formalised through a sequence of parliamentary and ecclesiastical measures, including the Act in Restraint of Appeals in 1533, the Act for the Submission of the Clergy and Restraint of Appeals in 1534, and the Act of Supremacy in 1534, which established the king's authority over the Church of England (Bray, 1994; Elton, 1977; Gee & Hardy, 1914). This was not only a legal change but also a redefinition of obedience, since the king's supremacy required the rejection of foreign ecclesiastical jurisdiction and the public recognition of royal authority over the English Church. Bernard treats this as central to the remaking of the Henrician Church, while Marshall and Gray emphasise the political and religious significance of allegiance, oath-taking and obedience during the break with Rome (Bernard, 2007, p. 225; Gray, 2013, pp. 116–227; Marshall, 2017, pp. 203–43). Whiting also shows that anti-papal language and local responses to the Henrician changes were part of the wider reception of royal supremacy (Whiting, 1998, pp. 12–14). At the same time, Henry's religious policy remained doctrinally cautious. The Ten Articles of 1536 and the Bishops' Book of 1537 introduced reforming elements, while the Act of Six Articles in 1539 reaffirmed several traditional doctrines, including the real presence in the Eucharist and clerical celibacy (Bray, 1994; Dickens, 1978, pp. 157–86; MacCulloch, 1996, pp. 159–92). This mixed character is significant for the wills because Henrician testamentary language was produced under a regime that rejected papal authority but did not consistently reject traditional religion. Traditional committals, references to saints and older pious formulae could therefore stand beside the language of royal supremacy and reform.

The Henrician evidence shows that traditional testamentary language remained strong in Kent during the first half of Henry VIII's reign. Between 1509 and 1513, 88% of Kentish PCC wills were Traditional/Catholic, and although the figure declined to 82% in 1514–1518 and 75% in 1519–1523, traditional language still clearly dominated. This suggests that, in the early decades of the sixteenth century, the wills in the Kentish PCC corpus continued to preserve the inherited language of late medieval piety. For many testators the soul was still committed to God, Mary and the saints. The evidence gives no sign of a sudden Protestant turn before the break with Rome.

As shown in Figure 1, the 93% figure for 1524–1528 is the high point of the Henrician evidence. It places traditional formulae at the centre of Kentish PCC will-writing just before the political and ecclesiastical changes of the 1530s. This matters because it resists a simple story of Protestant advance from the beginning of Henry VIII's reign. Kent may have been open to reformist influence, but before the break with Rome the wills in this corpus still used a strongly Catholic vocabulary. The first marked change comes after 1529–1533. Traditional wills still stood at 89% in that period, but fell to 63% in 1534–1538.

The fall from 89% to 63% should not be read as evidence that Kentish PCC testators suddenly became Protestant. It shows that fewer wills were classified as Traditional/Catholic under the criteria used here. Traditional wording remained, but it no longer dominated to the same extent as before the mid-1530s. The decline continued: 58% in 1539–1543 and 43.9% in 1544–1548. By the end of Henry VIII's reign, and at the beginning of the Edwardian transition, traditional formulae had fallen below half of the corpus. The wills preserve this tension: papal authority had been rejected, and reformist language was becoming more visible, yet Marian devotion, the saints and older pious wording had not disappeared.

The evidence of the wills of the reign of Henry VIII points to a transition rather than a replacement. In this Kentish PCC corpus, the main change is the weakening of traditional testamentary language after the mid-1530s. The reason for the reduction in traditional testamentary language and expression may be

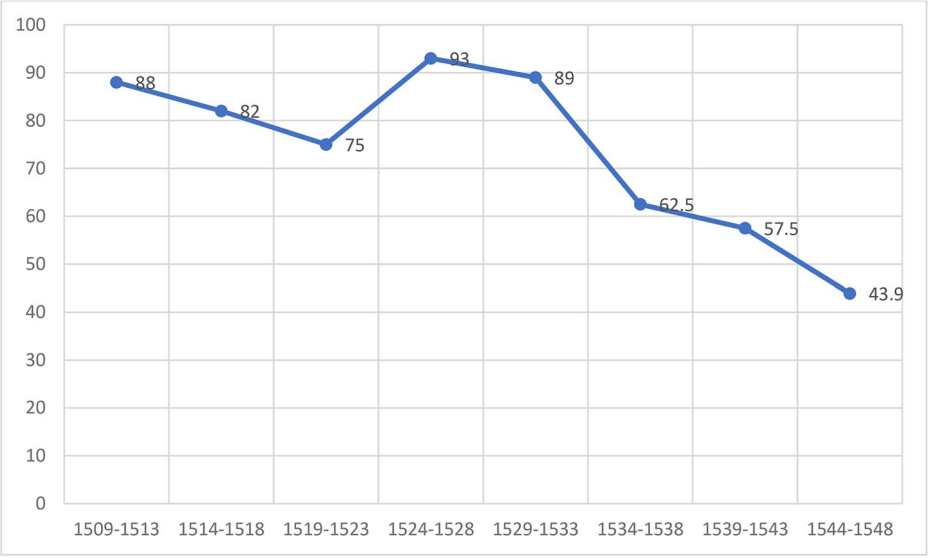


Figure 1. Percentage of traditional wills during the reign of Henry VIII.

due to royal supremacy, the weakening of intercessory institutions, reformist ideas and the need to write religious formulae within a changed political order. Even so, traditional wording continued in substantial numbers. Many testators still wrote about death and salvation through older devotional language while reformist forms became more visible.

4.2. Edward VI

Under Edward VI, reform moved more clearly in a Protestant direction. Somerset and then Northumberland did not limit reform to the royal supremacy. Doctrine, worship, liturgy, images and parish life were all affected. The Edwardian Injunctions of 1547, the Sacrament Act and the dissolution of chantries weakened the older system of intercession for the dead (Duffy, 2005, p. 455; Gee & Hardy, 1914, p. 328; Ryrie, 2009, pp. 159–63). The 1549 Book of Common Prayer gave the realm an English liturgy with a reformist character, and the Act of Uniformity attempted to establish that order in the parishes (Cranmer, 1549; Smyth, 2014, p. 228). Edwardian reform therefore changed not only ecclesiastical authority, but also the language in which death, salvation and intercession could be imagined. It was not accepted everywhere. The Prayer Book Rebellion in Devon and Cornwall shows that official reform could meet resistance as well as obedience (Duffy, 2005, pp. 454–60; Ryrie, 2009, pp. 163–68). The 1552 Book of Common Prayer then moved further towards Protestantism by reshaping the language of communion and reducing sacramental ambiguity.

The Edwardian material shows a much sharper movement away from Traditional/Catholic formulae. In the reign-count used here, Kent has 62 wills from 1547 to 1553. The yearly figures are 50% in 1547, 33.3% in 1548, 0% in 1549, 28.6% in 1550, 10.5% in 1551, 9.1% in 1552 and 20% in 1553. The numbers fluctuate, especially because the yearly samples are small, but the direction is clear. Under Edward VI, traditional testamentary language became much less common than it had been under Henry VIII.

As Figure 2 indicates, the first Edwardian years were not a complete break. In 1547, 50% of Kentish PCC wills were Traditional/Catholic; in 1548, the figure fell to 33.3%. Older formulae therefore survived into the opening years of Edward's reign. This is not surprising. The religious language of wills did not change simply because a new monarch came to the throne. Testators, scribes, and local communities continued to draw on inherited forms of wording, even as official policy began to move more clearly in a Protestant direction.

The year 1549 is especially striking, because the proportion falls to 0%. This coincides with one of the central moments of Edwardian reform: the introduction of the first Book of Common Prayer and the Act of Uniformity. This historical context helps explain why committals to Mary and the saints become much less visible in the wills.

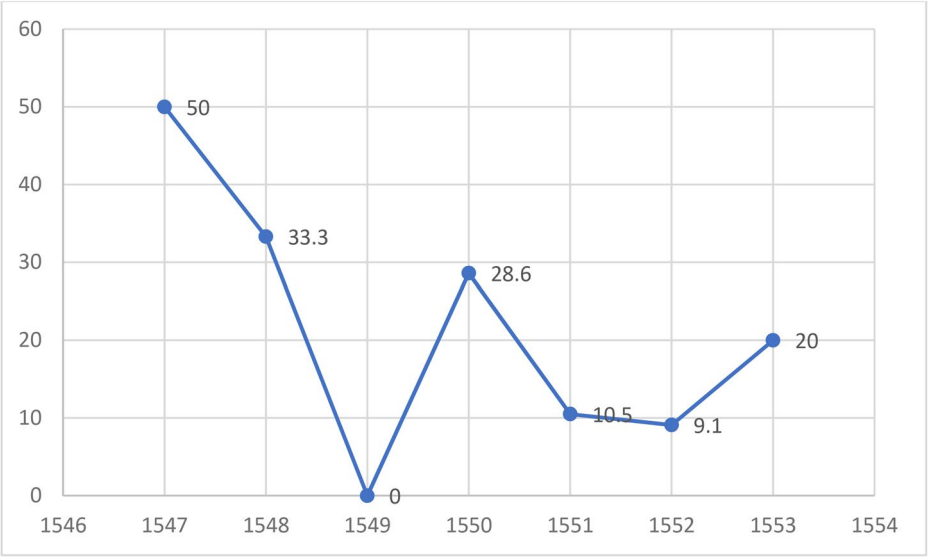


Figure 2. Percentage of traditional wills during the reign of Edward VI.

The increase in the traditional language to 28.6% in 1550 should be treated carefully. It is not enough to call it a Catholic recovery. The Edwardian yearly samples are small, and a few wills can change the percentage noticeably. The following years point more clearly in another direction: traditional expression remained low, at 10.5% in 1551 and 9.1% in 1552. The broader Edwardian pattern therefore shows a lower proportion of wills classified as Traditional/Catholic within the Kentish PCC corpus. Committals to God, Jesus Christ, or the Holy Trinity, without Mary and the saints, fit the Edwardian religious climate much more clearly than the mixed Henrician evidence.

The 20% recorded for 1553 also needs attention. It shows that older language had not entirely disappeared even at the end of Edward's reign. The accession of Mary I later that year also complicates the interpretation of 1553 as a single confessional moment. Some wills may have been written before the effects of Marian restoration became visible, while others may already belong to a moment of uncertainty. Overall, however, Edward VI's reign represents the clearest early break from traditional formulae within the Kentish PCC corpus. Compared with the final Henrician block of 1544–1548, where traditional wills stood at 44%, the Edwardian pattern shows a much more decisive decline.

In the Kentish PCC evidence examined here, the proportion of Traditional/Catholic wills fell from 43.9% in 1544–1548 to around 11% in 1549–1553, indicating a more pronounced decline in traditional formulae during the later Edwardian years. This does not necessarily mean that all testators became convinced Protestants. Rather, it shows that the accepted religious vocabulary of will-writing underwent significant change.

4.3. Mary I

Mary I's accession in 1553 reversed the official direction of reform. Her government restored Catholic worship, revived traditional doctrine and reunited England with Rome. The Marian regime repealed much of the Edwardian settlement and re-established the Mass, clerical celibacy, heresy legislation and papal jurisdiction (Duffy, 2009; Loades, 1991; Wizeman, 2006). The reconciliation with Rome under Cardinal Pole represented not only a political act but also an attempt to restore England to Catholic unity (Duffy, 2009, pp. 1–28; Loades, 1991, pp. 188–215). Marian policy also involved the prosecution of Protestants, and the burnings recorded by John Foxe became central to later Protestant memory of the period (Foxe, 1563; Freeman & Wall, 2001). Yet the Marian restoration was short and inherited a society already shaped by two decades of religious change.

The Marian PCC evidence demonstrates that Catholic restoration did affect testamentary formulae, but not immediately and not in a simple linear pattern. In 1553, 50% of Kentish PCC wills were Traditional/

Catholic. This represents an immediate increase from the low Edwardian levels and may suggest that some testators quickly adapted to the accession of a Catholic queen. It may also indicate that some wills preserved or returned to traditional formulae that had become less visible under Edward VI. In this sense, the rise in 1553 can be interpreted either as rapid conformity to Marian policy or as the renewed visibility of traditional Catholic formulae after Edwardian Protestantism.

Table 10 shows that Protestant and Traditional/Catholic wills each account for 39 of the 81 Marian wills, while three are classified as Ambiguous. The annual distribution also reveals a change in their relative proportions. In 1554, 8 of the 12 wills were classified as Protestant, 3 as Traditional/Catholic and 1 as Ambiguous. All five wills from 1555 were classified as Protestant, although this small sample limits the significance of the percentage. By 1557 and 1558, Traditional/Catholic wills formed the majority, while Protestant wills remained present. These classifications describe the balance of testamentary formulae within the sample rather than establish the religious allegiance of individual testators.

As Figure 3 demonstrates, the following years make the picture more complicated. Traditional wills decreased to 25% in 1554 and then to 0% in 1555. This is important because Mary's reign is normally associated with the restoration of Catholicism. The Kentish PCC evidence, however, does not show an immediate return to Catholic testamentary language. This may be connected to the unstable situation in Kent during Mary's reign. Wyatt's Rebellion began in Kent in 1554 and was linked to opposition to Mary's Spanish marriage, as well as to wider anxiety about the direction of the regime. The decline may reflect caution, uncertainty, political reluctance, or Edwardian habits that continued into Mary's reign. The 0% in 1555 is particularly striking, since in this sample traditional formulae disappear for a moment even under a Catholic queen.

After 1555 the evidence moves in another direction. Traditional wills rose to 35.3% in 1556, and then to 66.6% in 1557 and 65.2% in 1558. This later Marian increase fits more closely with the consolidation of Catholic restoration. By this stage, England had been reconciled with Rome, Catholic worship had been restored, and Protestant dissent had become more dangerous. The execution of leading reformers,

Table 10. Classification of Kentish PCC wills during Mary I's reign.

Year	Total Wills	Protestant	Traditional/catholic	Ambiguous
1553	6	3 (50%)	3 (50%)	0 (0%)
1554	12	8 (66.7%)	3 (25%)	1 (8.3%)
1555	5	5 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
1556	17	9 (52.9%)	6 (35.3%)	2 (11.8%)
1557	18	6 (33.3%)	12 (66.7%)	0 (0%)
1558	23	8 (34.8%)	15 (65.2%)	0 (0%)
Total	81	39 (48.1%)	39 (48.1%)	3 (3.7%)

Source: Çelik, 2026a, 2026c, Table 37.

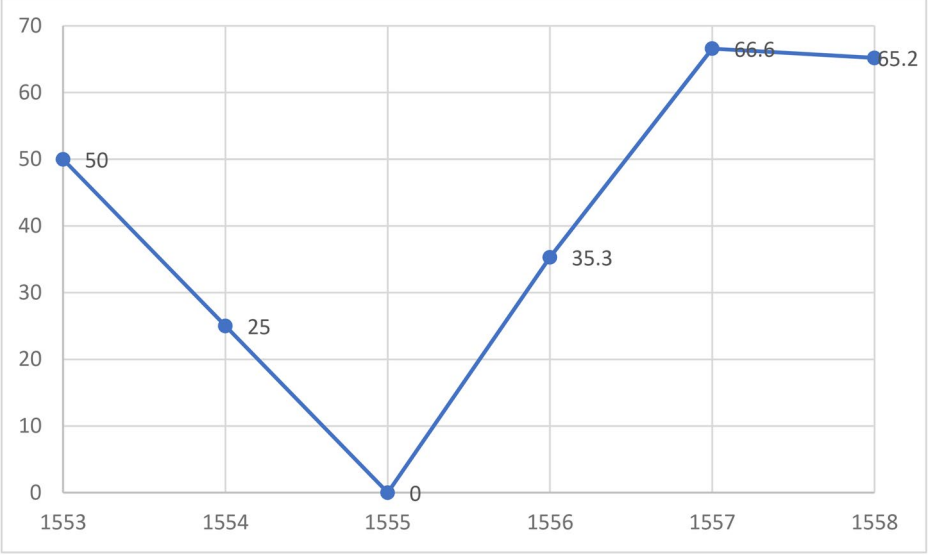


Figure 3. Percentage of traditional wills during the reign of Mary I.

including Thomas Cranmer, also shaped the religious climate of these years. In this context, the return of traditional formulae in Kentish PCC wills may point to the renewed public acceptability of Catholic language. It may also show the recovery of older devotional vocabulary, or conformity to the restored religious order.

One example of mixed wording appears in the Marian Kentish material summarised in my earlier research: a committal combining the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary and the Holy Company of Heaven (Çelik, 2026a, Table 19). This combination brings a Trinitarian reference together with traditional intercessory figures. Within the interpretive framework used here, it illustrates why a reference to the Trinity cannot independently determine the classification of a will: the other entities named in the same committal must also be considered. The combination does not, by itself, establish concealed Protestant allegiance. The Marian graph therefore reveals both restoration and delay. The final years of Mary's reign show a strong return of traditional language, but the first years reveal hesitation and instability. This is why Marian wills are particularly important for the categories of Ambiguous and Crypto-Protestant/Catholic. A will written under Mary I may appear Catholic because it conforms to restored formulae, but it may also contain traces of Protestant language. Conversely, a will that avoids traditional formulae under Mary may reflect Protestant vocabulary, caution, scribal habit, or simply the persistence of Edwardian formulae. The Marian evidence therefore supports the larger argument of this article: testamentary language responded to royal policy, but it did not do so automatically or uniformly. These categories describe formulaic language rather than provide direct proof of concealed religious allegiance.

4.4. Elizabeth I

Elizabeth I's religious settlement again altered the political and ecclesiastical framework. The Act of Supremacy and the Act of Uniformity in 1559 restored royal control over the English Church and imposed a revised Book of Common Prayer (Bray, 1994; Gee & Hardy, 1914; MacCulloch, 1996, pp. 386–413). Elizabeth did not use the title 'Supreme Head' in the same way as Henry VIII, but the royal supremacy was re-established through the language of supreme governance. Historians have often treated the settlement as a political and religious compromise, but it nevertheless returned the English Church to a Protestant framework of worship and authority (Haigh, 1993, pp. 238–70; Marshall, 2012, pp. 105–35). The Thirty-Nine Articles, finalised in 1563 and authorised in 1571, further defined the doctrinal position of the Elizabethan Church (Bray, 1994, pp. 291–314; MacCulloch, 1996, pp. 500–20).

The Elizabethan classification data show that Protestant wills formed the majority in each period reported in Table 11, alongside continuing Traditional/Catholic and Ambiguous categories. The transition from Mary I to Elizabeth I is particularly dramatic. In the final year of Mary's reign, traditional wills stood at 65.2%. During the first years of the reign of Elizabeth I, 1558–1562, traditional wills decreased to 30.7%. Elizabeth's accession and the return of Protestant rule, therefore, seem to have affected testamentary language quickly.

Among the 846 wills tabulated in Table 11, 605 (71.5%) were classified as Protestant, 177 (20.9%) as Traditional/Catholic and 64 (7.6%) as Ambiguous. Protestant wills formed a majority in every interval, although their proportion fluctuated rather than increasing continuously. Their share rose from 63.5% in 1558–1562 to 77.6% in 1573–1577 and stood at 70.2% in 1598–1602. Ambiguous wills also remained

Table 11. Classification of Elizabethan Kentish PCC Wills.

Period	Total Wills	Protestant	Traditional/catholic	Ambiguous
1558–1562	52	33 (63.5%)	16 (30.8%)	3 (5.8%)
1563–1567	51	31 (60.8%)	17 (33.3%)	3 (5.9%)
1568–1572	51	34 (66.7%)	17 (33.3%)	0 (0%)
1573–1577	58	45 (77.6%)	11 (19%)	2 (3.4%)
1578–1582	63	43 (68.3%)	16 (25.4%)	4 (6.3%)
1583–1587	117	88 (75.2%)	22 (18.8%)	7 (6.0%)
1588–1592	161	121 (75.2%)	29 (18%)	11 (6.8%)
1593–1597	179	130 (72.6%)	26 (14.5%)	23 (12.8%)
1598–1602	114	80 (70.2%)	23 (20.2%)	11 (9.6%)
Total	846	605 (71.5%)	177 (20.9%)	64 (7.6%)

Source: Çelik, 2026a, 2026c, Table 39. The counts reproduced from Çelik, 2026a, 2026c, Table 39, total 846, whereas the stated Elizabethan corpus comprises 854 wills. Percentages are calculated from the tabulated counts.

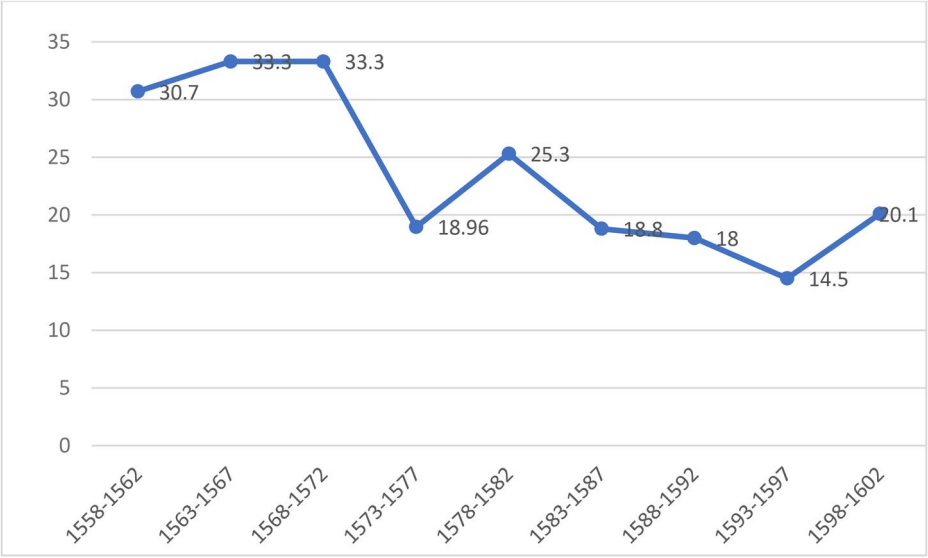


Figure 4. Percentage of traditional wills during the reign of Elizabeth I.

present in most intervals, reaching 12.8% in 1593–1597. These distributions support the predominance of Protestant formulaic expression within the tabulated material while showing the continued presence of traditional and ambiguous wording.

As shown in Figure 4, the decline of traditional wills is visible in the early Elizabethan regime and should be read in connection with the settlement of 1559. The Royal Injunctions reinforced this Protestant direction by regulating preaching and attacking Catholic rites and images. Under these conditions, older testamentary formulae had less room to remain publicly visible. Wills written after 1558 were produced in a realm that had once again broken with Rome and officially returned to Protestant worship.

Yet the Elizabethan data also show that Protestantisation was gradual. Traditional wills remained at 30.7% in 1558–1562 and rose slightly to 33.3% in both 1563–1567 and 1568–1572. These figures indicate that a substantial minority of wills continued to preserve traditional language during the first decade of Elizabeth's reign. This persistence may reflect conservative piety, the recent memory of Marian Catholic restoration, scribal habit, family expectation, or local religious culture. It may also show that the Elizabethan settlement, although Protestant in direction, did not immediately erase older forms of religious expression.

The Elizabethan Kentish material also contains combinations that resist a straightforward confessional reading. The entity tables in my earlier research record committals combining God, Jesus Christ, Mary and the Holy Company of Heaven; this combination was classified as Ambiguous at the level of the committal (Çelik, 2026a, Tables 21–22). Here, references to God and Christ occur alongside traditional intercessory figures within the same formula. This example demonstrates why the presence of Christ-centred wording alone cannot determine the classification of an entire will. A clearer decline appears after 1573. Traditional wills fell to 18.96% in 1573–1577, rose temporarily to 25.3% in 1578–1582 and then remained generally low: 18.8% in 1583–1587, 18% in 1588–1592, 14.5% in 1593–1597 and 20.1% in 1598–1602. The lowest point is 14.5% in 1593–1597. Table 11 confirms that wills classified as Protestant accounted for between 68.3% and 77.6% of the tabulated wills in each interval from 1573 onwards. The increase to 20.1% in 1598–1602 does not change the general pattern. Protestant formulae became the main form of testamentary expression, but some older wording still remained. The reasons for this could vary from will to will. Protestant wording in these wills does not have one single explanation. It may sometimes reflect the testator's own preference. In other cases, it may reflect the expectations of the Elizabethan Church or the habits of scribes and legal writing. What is clear is that by the later Elizabethan decades traditional formulae no longer dominated the Kentish PCC corpus.

5. Conclusion

This article has traced the religious language and confessional expression of testators through 1,233 Kentish PCC wills from Henry VIII to Elizabeth I. The aim of the article was not to use wills as direct evidence of the personal piety of every testator, but to evaluate the repeated formulae preserved in a PCC corpus that mainly represents gentry and middling Kentish testators and changes in religious language and confessional expression. These wills are legal documents, but they are also religious documents.

The evidence from Kentish PCC wills does not show a smooth passage from Catholic formulae to Protestant language and expression; the process was uneven. Under Henry VIII, older religious phrases and formulaic elements remained strong, especially before the break with Rome. Royal supremacy and the rejection of papal authority changed the setting in which wills were written, and traditional formulae then began to weaken, but they did not disappear. Under Edward VI, the shift in confessional expression and the use of religious vocabulary became clearer: Mary and the saints were less visible, and committals to God, Jesus Christ or the Holy Trinity grew stronger.

Mary's reign interrupted the idea that Protestant vocabulary and confessional expression were simply moving forward step by step. The evidence does not show an immediate return to earlier Catholic formulae. It suggests delay, caution, ambiguity, partial restoration and the return of some older forms. Under Elizabeth I, Protestant language became the dominant pattern in the corpus, while older, uncertain formulae continued to survive but began to weaken. The movement from Catholic formulae to Protestant expression was therefore gradual, uneven and capable of reversal. Reform, restoration, settlement, caution and inherited wording all left marks in the corpus. The article contributes to debates about Protestantisation by distinguishing the decline of traditional formulae from the adoption of explicitly Protestant expression. The persistence and Marian recovery of traditional formulae are consistent with the emphasis on the durability of traditional religion in the work of Haigh and Duffy, although testamentary wording cannot independently establish continued personal adherence (Duffy, 2005; Haigh, 1993). The coexistence of different forms of expression also supports approaches that emphasise adaptation, conformity and uneven responses to reform rather than straightforward acceptance or rejection (Marshall, 2012; Shagan, 2003).

The separate classification of Protestant, Traditional/Catholic and Ambiguous wills makes this distinction visible. For historians using wills as evidence of religious change, the findings demonstrate the importance of examining combinations of expressions within documents and reporting the coexistence of different categories. The significance of this corpus therefore extends beyond the chronology of Kentish reform: it provides a basis for comparing changes in testamentary expression across regions without assuming that shifts in formulaic language directly measure changes in personal piety.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Oğulcan Çelik**: Data curation, Methodology.

Declaration of generative AI use

During the preparation of this manuscript, ChatGPT (GPT-5.5 Thinking) was used only as an assistive tool for language refinement, proofreading, selected clarity revisions, reference-list organisation and the preliminary filtering of the Excel dataset. The Excel dataset was prepared by the author. Any AI-assisted filtering was checked by the author against the original dataset before any figures were used, and the tables were created manually in Excel. The tool was not used to design the study, formulate the research questions, analyse or interpret the evidence, or produce the research findings. The author reviewed, checked and revised the assisted outputs where necessary and takes full responsibility for the final text, data, argument and conclusions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

No external funding supported this research.

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Data availability statement

The primary sources used in this article are held at The National Archives, Kew, in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury will registers, PROB 11. The compiled Corpus of Kentish Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills, 1509–1603, is the author's unpublished research dataset and can be requested from the author where appropriate.

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