Only a very small amount of women's writing survives from Western Europe in the early middle ages. The few writings we do have, therefore, deserve more attention than they have yet received. Although literacy in the Barbarian West was almost entirely confined to members of the Church and the aristocracy, with, perhaps, a small number of professionals such as lawyers and doctors, it was not confined to men.¹ In seventh- and eighth-century Frankia, some women's convents, such as Jouarre and Chelles, maintained writing-ateliers, or scriptoria, for the copying of manuscripts, developing distinctive script styles of their own.² At least two Merovingian nuns are known to have written lives of the founders of their communities,³ and one ninth-century Frankish noblewoman, Dhuoda, the wife of Bernard of Septimania, has left an original composition, a book she wrote for her teenaged son William, who had been taken away from her as a hostage for his father's good behaviour.⁴ There are many names

¹ The many charters surviving from sixth-century North Italy suggest that there were still professional lawyers in some Italian cities. See further Bernhard Bischoff, Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages, transl. D.O. Cróinín & D. Ganz, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge, 1990), 102, and Rosamond McKitterick, The Carolingians and the Written Word (Cambridge, 1989), 87-90 and 213-6.
of noblewomen and abbesses from the seventh to ninth centuries mentioned in contexts which prove them to have been literate. In Anglo-Saxon England, the earliest surviving literary work by a known writer, the De Virginitate of Aldhelm, who was abbot of Malmesbury and bishop of Sherborne in the late seventh century, was addressed to a group of nuns at Barking in response to their letters, and there is evidence of various kinds for copying and original composition by early Anglo-Saxon nuns. Thus, the essential problem with finding texts written by women in this period does not lie with their writing, but with the subsequent transmission. Only the smallest handful of early medieval texts (apart from charters) survive as autograph manuscripts, and apparently useless writings such as old letters by unimportant people could do useful service in binding and repairing treasured texts, or they could even be made into glue. A very clear instance of what tended to happen to women’s writing is the textual history of the letters of St Jerome, one of the fathers of the Western church. Many of his correspondents were women, and some of his most technical treatises were addressed to them. Such women as his friend Paula could read Latin, Greek and Hebrew, as we can tell from Jerome’s letters. The women preserved his letters, and they were subsequently kept and copied as valuable records of the great man. Either he did not keep theirs; or perhaps more probably, posterity did not value them. Similarly, in sixth-century Frankia, we

5 The letter by the abbess Caesaria of Arles to Radegund written before 587, which is discussed below, urges that the latter allow no woman to enter her community at Poitiers who does not learn letters (MGH, Epistolae merovingici et karolini aevi I, ed. E. Dümmler et al. (Berlin, 1892), 450-3).
6 The convent at Barking seems, from indirect evidence, to have been a notably scholarly community in the seventh century (Bede, Historia Ecclesiastica IV.6, ed. and transl. B. Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), 354-5).
8 Aline Rousselle, Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity, transl. F. Pheasant (Oxford, 1988), 182-3. We might also bear in mind that Jerome’s friend Marcella, whom he called the foremost student of Scripture in Rome after himself, credited her writings to male authorities so as not to appear to be preaching (Jerome, Epistolae