The history of perversions essentially constitutes a subtext of the larger history of sexuality; the two are intimately intertwined. Despite the apparent impact of societal attitudes on sexuality throughout the ages, the study of human sexuality has been a subject largely ignored by historians. Only in recent years has sexuality become a subject of serious study. Historically, perversion has been the dark side of sexuality that was itself already shrouded in a repressive silence and taboo. Viewed as the unspeakable incarnation of evil, perverse sexual behavior has been considered sinful, blasphemous, immoral, corrupt, and illegal—in fact, as a crime calling for severe punitive measures. In more recent times, it has been perceived as incorrigibly abnormal, pathological, a loathsome disease unvarying in its relentless downward course. Even so respected a pioneer as Krafft-Ebing, in his work on perversion, initially published the descriptions of sexual acts in Latin, in part because of the likelihood of societal outrage at the time. Only in the past half-century or so has a slowly evolving change emerged in attitudes toward perverse sexuality.

For purpose of explication, the history of perversion can be viewed from two main perspectives—premodern and modern. In using these terms for our discussion of perverse sexuality, we are following Robinson’s use of these terms in his narrative on
human sexuality. The premodern perspective represents the history of perversion before it became a domain of scientific classification and study appropriated by a multitude of specialists. In the premodern perspective, the history of perversion must be traced within an array of traditions: religious, mythological, cultural, literary, and legal. The modern perspective, which emerges approximately in the mid-nineteenth century, involves disciplines such as anthropology, medicine, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, and sexology; thus, from the modern perspective, any discussion of perversion necessarily acknowledges a range of considerations that include the emerging "psychotechnologic," sociopolitical, and legal-forensic aspects.

PREMODERN PERSPECTIVES

In his comprehensive 1976 history of Sexual Variance in Society and History, Bullough outlines the main prescientific traditions in the area of variant sexuality. Bullough describes the early biblical sources of ancient Judaism as proscribing such sexual activities as homosexuality, bestiality, transvestism, and masturbation. On the other hand, he notes that the ancient Greeks had a more tolerant view of most sexual activities, providing they did not threaten the integrity of the family. Homosexuality was pervasive: men impersonated women in the theater; cross-dressing occurred at Dionysius' festivals; sadomasochistic practices were incorporated in certain religious ceremonies; bestiality was described in fables and romances; and a sexual relationship between an adult male and a young boy was considered a respected form of education. Licht points out, however, that to the Greeks a "young boy" actually meant a sexually mature or pubescent male. Furthermore, the sensual part of the relationship was not necessarily the most significant. Rather, for the Greeks, this love of boys "has its roots in the unexampled ethical valuation of the masculine character in public and private life" (p 440). The term "pederasty" comes from the Greek "boy" and "love"; in ancient Greece, this term had absolutely no pejorative connotation. This attitude toward pederasty seems to have passed on to the early Romans, as the behavior