Cesare Lombroso is best remembered as the founder of modern criminology and author of ‘odd’ theories of the ‘born criminal’ that strike modern sensibility as both ridiculous and horrific. However mocked, at the time of their inception, Lombroso’s descriptions of the physiognomic characteristics of criminals – their heads were meant to be asymmetrical, their upper lips thin, their ears large and protruding, their bushy eyebrows met over the nose, their eyes were deep-set, and even their toes were pointy – were neither unprecedented nor unique. By relying on constitutional explanations of deviancy, Lombroso, like contemporary British psychiatrists such as Maudsley, conflated crime and disease as part of the same phenomenon. Educated by positivism’s ideals, Lombroso followed the trend of Italian psychiatry of the last three decades of the nineteenth century and believed that there existed a continuity between phenomena like madness and normal physiological states, so that the passions of the insane person were considered an exaggeration of tendencies present in healthy people. Studying pathological behaviours was thus a way to gain a better understanding of the nature of ‘normal’ men. Nevertheless, Lombroso’s endless catalogues of deviancy appear to stand at odds with this assumption because his extensive lists of physiognomic markers made the abnormal visually distinguishable and separate from the ‘normal’. It was this last aspect of Lombroso’s research that made his theories very popular: the international medical community was the first to be seduced by it, and the popular imagination of places like Italy, Europe, and North and Latin America soon followed.

Sexual abnormality was one of the many forms of deviancy Lombroso investigated in over thirty uninterrupted years of research. Ever since the 1870s Lombroso had been interested in sexual deviancy – an area he would explore in depth in the following two decades. By the 1890s, he was well established in the international medical community as a pioneer of the emerging medical field of sexology, which was increasingly drawn to the study of sexual perversion, and in particular to sexual inversion. Over the course of his career, Lombroso articulated different explanations of same-sex desires, with the result that his work on the topic is particularly obscured by
contradictions and shifting positions – as is his broader work on criminality. But although historians from Italy and elsewhere have written extensively on Lombroso’s theories of criminal anthropology, they have consistently overlooked his research on sexual perversion.

This chapter contributes to filling this gap and explores how Lombroso’s concepts of same-sex desires shifted in the course of his career, paying particular attention to how older ideas of pederasty and tribadism were intertwined and confused with the ‘new’ psychiatric category of sexual inversion. Some aspects of Lombroso’s concept of ‘pederasty’ anticipated the psychiatric idea of sexual inversion, for instance by indicating that all pederasts had certain specific psychological characteristics. It is possible to argue that even if Lombroso applied the term ‘sexual inversion’ in a psychiatric context, and ‘pederasty’ in a legal context, his work confirms that pederasty was more than a juridical term referring exclusively to same-sex practices. Further, Lombroso interpreted the concept of sexual inversion as a continuation of older medical ideas of monomania. In linking the psychiatric category of sexual inversion to the older medical debate of the ‘folies raisonnantes’ and partial insanity, Lombroso did not recognise any conceptual innovations surrounding the debate about sexual inversion. This was not due to his lack of knowledge about the growing field of sexology; on the contrary, he was well abreast of the latest research on sexual perversion. Moreover, Lombroso’s emphasis on the constitutional elements in the emergence of sexual inversion and his obsession with bodily markers of human deviance prevented him from developing any substantial psychological analysis of sexual inversion, which other psychiatrists of the time were pioneering.

The analysis of Lombroso’s ideas on male same-sex desires will be followed by a brief section exploring his role in the popularisation of sexology in Italy. Sections three and four closely examine his work on female same-sex desires. Throughout his career, Lombroso argued that sexuality was the key to distinguishing between appropriate and deviant female roles. In La donna delinquente, la prostituta e la donna normale [The Criminal Woman, the Prostitute and the Normal Woman] (1893) Lombroso claimed that the prostitute was the equivalent of the male ‘born criminal’; in his characterisation of female deviancy, women’s active sexuality played a critical role. Thus, by definition, the sexuality of female deviants was irregular, but played only a secondary role in defining male criminals. Given that female deviancy was informed by sexual abnormality, Lombroso and other authors published by the Archivio di psichiatria were bound to engage with female same-sex desires in the course of their investigations. Indeed, their commitment to shedding light on existing forms of deviation compelled them to study one of the main examples of female active sexual behaviour. In the long term the enthusiasm both Lombroso and his followers displayed for studying human deviancy fostered a proliferation of documents relating to female same-sex desires that was unparalleled in Great Britain.