But suppose that many of our common Thieves were not to be buried at all, and some of them made Skeletons…. What if it was a Disgrace to the surviving Relations of those, who had Lectures read upon their Bodies, and were made use of for Anatomical Preparations?¹

The author of these lines, Dr. Bernard Mandeville, was amongst those ‘respectable’ citizens who attended public hangings at the gallows at Tyburn, roughly three miles from London’s notorious Newgate prison. Like many of his sort, Mandeville was appalled by the raucous opposition to authority he observed there. His letters of 1725 (first published in the *British Journal* and later issued together as a pamphlet, *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Frequent Executions at Tyburn*) lament the tumult surrounding public executions. Rather than solemn rituals that impress the lower classes with the gravity of the law, public hangings had become occasions for turbulent displays of solidarity with the condemned by thousands of the London poor. Deploring the ‘scene of confusion’ that reigned in the streets, Mandeville complains that the jailors are regularly assaulted.

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¹ Mandeville 1964, p. 27.
by ‘the most resolute and sturdy of the Mob’. He bemoans ‘the loud laughter’ and ‘oaths and vile expressions’ of a riotous crowd that overflows with drunks and gin-sellers, cats and dogs. Ticking off the terrible effects of this boisterous, chaotic whirl of bodies and animals, he enumerates the ‘blows that are struck, the heads that are broke, the pieces of swinging sticks, and blood, that fly about’. Having completed his horrible picture, Mandeville turns to the commotion that ensues once the hanging is complete: ‘The Tragedy being ended, the next Entertainment is a Squabble between the Surgeons and the Mob, about the dead Bodies of the Malefactors…. They have suffer’d the Law (cries the Rabble), and shall have no other Barbarities put upon them.’

The barbarity in question is, of course, dissection – the very reason for the presence of the ‘surgeons’ – which, as the eighteenth century progressed, was practised on growing numbers of corpses of the poor. Addressing this issue, Mandeville’s rhetoric changes register. No longer the outraged observer of the tumultuous rabble, he strides forward as a dispassionate scientist, extolling dissection as necessary to the progress of knowledge. To his dismay, however, the royal road to science is blocked by the unruly mob, which battles the surgeons for the corpses of the condemned:

…the superstitious Reverence of the Vulgar for a Corpse, even of a Malefactor, and the strong Aversion they have against dissecting them, are prejudicial to the Publick; For as Health and sound Limbs are the most desirable of all Temporal Blessings, so we ought to encourage the Improvement of Physick and Surgery. The Knowledge of Anatomy is inseparable from the Studies of either….

This argument leads the good doctor to a proposal that anticipated the whole direction of ruling-class opinion on these matters for the next hundred years: routine dissection of the bodies of all who have been condemned. While pitching his proposal as a scientific duty, Mandeville does not conceal the social agenda it enacts. Dissection, it turns out, ought also to be a source of disgrace and dishonour:

But suppose that many of our common Thieves were not to be buried at all, and some of them made Skeletons…. What if it was a Disgrace to the