

A gigantic flood of poison swells daily and nightly in the metropolis. The Mississippi is the Father of Waters — the Thames is the Mother of Stenches. Putrid and noisome, our river rolls the filth of London to within a few miles of the sea; the sea drives it back in an aggravated stage of decomposition, and here the abomination floats between the Thames Tunnel and Battersea, hourly blackening, rotting, and steaming with vast escapes of contagion. Members of Parliament and mudlarks, porters on piers and passengers by steamboats, sicken under the loathsome influence; city physicians and surgeons find the numbers of their patients increased; something only a few degrees removed from cholera makes its appearance, and the Board of Works deliberates upon the necessity of “doing something.” . . . The Thames will still be our main drain — our huge receptacle of dead animals, decayed vegetables, ordure, putrescence and all else that should be carried far from the habitations of men. It will still be a body of murky, cloudy, dense, and stinking liquid. . . . With a hundred fountains, fed by the latrines, urinals and other deleterious sources playing into its bed, it will remain the great Plague of London — a perpetual nuisance and pollution. Legislators in the library of the [House of] Commons express themselves with profane emphasis when the gross vapour rises to their nostrils. . . . The summer, which blesses the land, curses the water — at least in the London valley. The slimy putrefaction of the Thames simmers in the heat, and from every bubble breaks a discharge of insufferable miasma.

-The Leader, “The Thames Festilence” (1858) excerpt.