ADAPTIVE REVISION is any transformation of an originating work into a different form or genre. It is material evidence of one reader’s interpretation of another writer’s work. We generally think of “announced” Adaptations—let’s say a play or film version; see Sample 8—as the only form of adaptive revision, but we also take the use of Sources as adaptive.

“Benito Cereno” includes numerous word-for-word borrowings as well as meaningful revisions of language taken from HM’s source, Delano’s Narrative (1). The novella is effectively HM’s version of Delano. But HM also made significant departures, in particular his treatment of slave-owner Don Alejandro Aranda’s body.

For its reading text of “Benito Cereno,” MEL uses the Putnam’s Monthly Magazine text as the edition’s Base Version (2). Along with its textual and contextual notes, MEL links to Revision Narratives (3) discussing HM’s borrowings, revisions, and departures from the Delano source. The notes also take readers into the Delano original.

Revision Narrative: HM revises Delano (366). Delano reports that the slaves kill Aranda “because they said they could not otherwise obtain their liberty.” But in “Benito Cereno” the killing is a warning to the remaining Spanish sailors not to resist the freed slaves.

But HM also departs from Delano. We learn at the end of the novella the nature of the slaves’ warning: Aranda’s body has been stripped of its flesh, and his skeleton hangs hidden in shrouds over the deck. It is also hinted that Aranda has been cannibalized.

To keep the seamen in subjection, he wanted to prepare a warning of what road they should be made to take and they or any of them oppose him.

Yau was the man who, by Babo’s command, willingly prepared the skeleton of Don Alejandro, in a way the negroes afterwards told the deponent, but which he, so long as reason is left him, can never divulge.