On Writing in Ciphers
I

Those who are charged with the highest affairs know by experience how important it is to have a very trustworthy person with whom to reveal projects and decisions of the most secret nature, without ever having reasons to regret it.\(^1\) This is rare, because men so often tend to perfidy, and so secure systems called ciphers have been devised, which would be useful, except for those who manage, through art and ingenuity, to read and interpret them. I admit that those in power may be served by those who are expert in such operations, if by their means the schemes and machinations of enemies can be revealed, but in my opinion, it is even more advantageous to be able to communicate our intentions to another, no matter how far away, in a way that no other mortal except the intended recipient of the missive is able to read them.

This present booklet of mine is a thorough treatment of both aspects of the question, paving the way for and directing the investigation into other people’s secrets, as well as how, as we shall see, to protect secrets of your own.

The present circumstances persuaded me to send these notes of mine to you. Many friends who are devoted to you exhorted me to do so. I will be delighted if this work pleases you.\(^i\)

II

While I was with Dati in the papal gardens in the Vatican, discussing, as usual, literary matters, we happened to praise in the most enthusiastic terms the German inventor who has recently made it possible, by means of a system of moveable type, to reproduce from a single exemplar more than two hundred volumes in one hundred days with the help of no more than three men. This makes it possible to obtain an entire, large format page from a single impression. That having brought us to similar appreciations of the brilliant discoveries in the most diverse areas, Dati fervidly admired those who, faced with strange characters with unusual meanings known only to the writers and receivers, called ciphers, have the skill to read and interpret them.\(^\text{ii}\)

Said Dati, looking at me, ‘You, who have always been involved in investigating occult arts and investigating the mysteries of nature, what do you think about these interpreters of ciphers and revealers of secrets, if we can call them that? Have you any knowledge of this subject?’

I said, smiling, ‘It is probably you, chief secretary to the Pope, who has sometimes had to make use of coded writing in dealing with those political affairs that must be kept top secret’.

‘That’s so’, answered Dati, ‘and in my position I wouldn’t mind being able to deal with them myself, without having to turn to an outside interpreter. Such messages are sometimes intercepted by spies and there arrive coded messages that should not be overlooked. If then you have discovered something in this regard, I pray you to let me in on it’.\(^\text{iii}\)

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\(^1\) Two kinds of notes appear in this text. Translator’s notes are numbered in Arabic numerals and appear as footnotes; commentary notes are numbered in Roman numerals and appear in the commentary which follows the translation.