Edmond Halley:
Commendatory Poem for
Isaac Newton’s Principia
Mathematica.

Behold! You grasp the Science of the Pole,
Earth’s wondrous Mass, how poif’d the mighty Whole,
Jove’s Reckoning, the Laws, when firft he made
All Things’ Beginnings, by his Will obey’d,
Thofe the Creator as the World’s Foundations laid.

The secret Chambers of the conquer’d Skies
Open to View. Hidden no longer lies
What binds the World’s Frame, and the constant Force
Which rolls the fartheft Planet in his Course.

Sol feated on the Throne commands that all
In Curves tendant to him shall ever fall,
Nor does he suffer the remoter Stars
Through the vaft Void direct to urge their Cars;
But by Attraction feiz’d the Atoms run
In Gyres predestin’d to the central Sun.
Known now th’ Ellipse that horrid Comets tread
We fear no more to see the streaming Head;
Hence we discover why her monthly Race
Phæbe performs with so unequal Pace,
And why to no Astronomer subject
Before, when she did Number’s Rein reject.
We learn why the four Seasons cycling move,
But, still advancing, th’ Equinoxes rove;
With what Pow’r wand’ring Cynthia compells
The Ebb and Flow of restles Oceán’s Swells:
She draws slack Water from the marshy Land,
Then Ships beware the treach’rous shoaling Sand;
When changing Phase her roundest Light restores,
The Waves surge foaming to the furthest Shores.
What often rack’d the ancient Sophist’s Brain,
What vex’d the loud-disputing Schools, in vain,
We see as clear before us in the Road,
When Mathematics drove away the Cloud.
No longer doubting in the Mists we stray;
Genius’ high Summit grants to us the Way
To reach the blessed Gods’ Abodes and pierce
The lofty Limits of the Universe.

Mortals arise! Put earthly Cares behind
And know the Pow’rs of the heav’n-born Mind!
That Mind, whose Nature is so far preferr’d
Above the mute Life of the grazing Herd.
Who Murder, Theft, and Perjury did cause
To cease by the Commands of publick Laws,
Who wand’ring Peoples taught no more to roam,
But settle, and build Walls about their Home,
Who blest Mankind with Gift of Ceres’ Grain,
Or from the Grape pref’r’d Remedy for Pain,
Or who th’ Employment fir’d of Nile’s Reed found,
To write, and show the eyes a painted Sound,
These left rais’d human Life: for they but fought
Few Things to ease th’ unhappy mortal Lot.
We banquet with the Gods, permitted now
The Poles’ Laws, the fixt Scheme of Things to know.
The Secrets sunk in dark Earth are reveal’d,
And what past Ages of the World conceal’d.

The Man who shows such Wonders, help me praise,
You who with Nectar pass your careless Days,
Newton unlocking Truth’s close-faften’d Chest,
Newton dear to the Muse, in whose pure Breast
Phœbus is present, and whose Mind inspires
With all of his divine, prophetic Fires.
Sing him, ye Mufes, for Right can approve,
No Mortal nearer touch the Gods above.

(Translated by Otto Steinmayer. For John Herington.)

Additional note: My former advisor and good friend John Herington, Professor of Greek at Yale University, suggested in 1982 that I make this translation, and I have not substantially revised it since. A few of the mathematical expressions which Halley was skilled enough to render in Latin verse may not be translated with perfect accuracy. What I here translated as “seasons” and “equinoxes” (lines 22-23) are in the original Latin nodi and auges. Nodi does indeed mean “the points where the seasons begin,” (Lewis and Short cite Manilius 3.618); auges I could not find in any lexicon. At last I came across it in an old article on some point of Arabic astrology; but the context was obscure and my translation remained a guess. I. Bernard Cohen, Anne Whitman, and Julia Budenz, in their magnificent new translation of the Principia (Berkeley, 1999) render the same line—

Why the nodes regress, and why the upper apsides move forward.

I defer to Cohen’s, Whitman’s, and Budenz’s superior scholarship; my poem here is old and I am reluctant to tinker with it, so I offer it to the reader here with this caveat.

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