

Chess is a game of pure skill: There are no dice, no cards, no random events to blame when you lose. But to be forced to acknowledge the superiority of your opponent is, as anyone who has ever had to do it will agree, a mortifying experience, and not everyone can endure it with equanimity.

Tennyson's verse play *Becket* (1884) opens with a chess game between King Henry II and Becket accompanied by some not very subtle double-meaning dialogue. The king will soon make Becket archbishop of Canterbury and later have him executed in the cathedral. The deed will be carried out—the perfect chessplayer's revenge—by four knights.

# Alfred, Lord Tennyson



## PROLOGUE

A Castle in Normandy. Interior of the Hall. Roofs of a City seen  
thro' Windows.

HENRY and BECKET at chess.

HENRY So then our good Archbishop Theobald  
Lies dying.

BECKET I am grieved to know as much.

HENRY But we have a mightier man than he  
For his successor.

BECKET Have you thought of one?

HENRY A cleric lately poisoned his own mother,  
And being brought before the courts of the Church,  
They but degraded him. I hope they whipped him.  
I would have hanged him.

BECKET It is your move.

HENRY Well—there.

[*Moves.*

The Church in the pell-mell of Stephen's time  
Hath climbed the throne and almost clutched the crown;  
But by the royal customs of our realm

### Three Tantrums



The Church should hold her baronies of me,  
Like other lords amenable to law.

I'll have them written down and made the law.

BECKET My liege, I move my Bishop.

HENRY And if I live,

No man without my leave shall excommunicate  
My tenants or my household.

BECKET Look to your King.

HENRY No man without my leave shall cross the seas  
To set the Pope against me—I pray your pardon.

BECKET Well—will you move?

HENRY There then!

[*Moves.*

BECKET Why—there then, for you see my Bishop

Hath brought your King to a standstill. You are beaten.

HENRY [*Kicks over the board.*

Why, there then—down go Bishop and King together.

I loathe being beaten; had I fixed my fancy

Upon the game I would have beaten thee.