

Mapping five of Steely Dan's most popular songs to Shakespeare plays and soliloquies reveals a shared preoccupation with themes of cynicism, disillusionment, and the complex inner lives of flawed characters.

1. "Deacon Blues" ➡ *Hamlet (To Be or Not to Be)*

"Deacon Blues" is a character study of a man who rejects societal norms to pursue a life as a jazz musician, an archetypal "loser" who finds nobility in his chosen path. The song's protagonist, who declares "I'll be what I want to be," embodies a deep-seated identity crisis and a profound sense of alienation. This mirrors Hamlet's famous **"To be, or not to be" soliloquy**. Both figures are in a state of existential contemplation, questioning the value of a conventional life and the wisdom of their ambitions. Just as Hamlet weighs the suffering of life against the unknown of death, the protagonist of "Deacon Blues" considers the "game" of a successful life and chooses to embrace a more authentic, albeit "losing," one.

2. "Reelin' In the Years" ➡ *Much Ado About Nothing*

This song, with its bitter and confrontational lyrics, maps directly to the central dynamic between Benedick and Beatrice in ***Much Ado About Nothing***. The song's narrator engages in a verbal duel with an ex-lover, revisiting past grievances and sarcastically questioning her choices. The sharp, witty exchanges are a modern-day version of Benedick's and Beatrice's **"merry war" of wits**. Both the song and the play use a façade of animosity to mask deeper, unresolved feelings. The "reelin' in the years" of the title is a form of emotional jousting, a post-mortem on a failed relationship that is not yet fully laid to rest.

3. "Do It Again" ➡ *Macbeth (Is this a dagger which I see before me?)*

The cyclical, self-destructive behavior of the narrator in "Do It Again" echoes the paranoid and guilt-ridden state of Macbeth. The song's protagonist is trapped in a loop of bad decisions—gambling, crime, and violence—and seems powerless to break free. The refrain, "You go back, Jack, do it again," is an inescapable command, much like the voice of guilt that haunts Macbeth. The song's atmosphere of feverish obsession and moral decay aligns with the famous **dagger soliloquy**, in which Macbeth's fractured mind conjures a hallucinatory object to justify his murderous intent. Both characters are victims of their own compulsions, drawn back to their mistakes as if by an unseen, malevolent force.

4. "Rikki Don't Lose That Number" ➡ Benedick's Soliloquy in *Much Ado About Nothing*

"Rikki Don't Lose That Number" is a seemingly cool and collected plea to a woman, but its subtext is one of clumsy infatuation and desperate hope. It's an internal monologue made public, a confession disguised as advice. This mirrors Benedick's famous **soliloquy** after he overhears that Beatrice is in love with him, forcing him to reconsider his stubborn vow against marriage. He famously says, "I will be horribly in love with her," recognizing his own folly with a mix of self-awareness and resignation. The song's narrator, like Benedick, is an intellectual who is unexpectedly disarmed by love and forced to abandon his cynical posturing.

5. "Peg" ➡ Ophelia's Final Soliloquy (*Hamlet*)

"Peg" is a portrait of a woman whose promise has been tarnished, an aspiring actress whose dreams have become something sordid. The lyrics are a conversation with a protagonist who seems fragile and lost. This evokes Ophelia's final, heart-wrenching scene in *Hamlet*, where she descends into madness after her father's death and Hamlet's betrayal. Her fragmented songs and symbolic distribution of flowers are a final, poignant expression of her broken state. The song's refrain, "It will come back to you," carries a double meaning—it could be a promise of a return to her former glory or a dark premonition of how her past will inevitably haunt her, much like the tragic weight of Ophelia's life.