Bahktin and the Carnivalesque

Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the “carnivalesque” bears more than some resemblance to the literary act of parody, though the literary act of carnival is a far more politically aware act than parody tends to be. Like parody, the act of carnival serves to critique and subvert norms of political, social, and cultural behavior. The act of carnival, then, serves through literature to critique notions and rules of established order, attack, deconstruct, and refuse to obey the rules and orders of systems of authority, which in turn allows for a critique of established laws and rules of a given society. In literature, the carnivalesque involves providing a public venue through which standards, norms and laws of governing cultures and societies are questioned, reworked, tested, and countered.

Application in Shakespeare’s Hamlet

Hamlet, in many respects, serves as the perfect example of the Carnivalesque, especially in the famous “Mousetrap” scene in which the actors reenact the very scene of Hamlet’s father’s death. In this scene in particular, standard political and social rule is subverted and over-turned, however temporarily, in order to critique, mock, and question standard authority and norms of behavior within the political world of the play.

Study Question:

1. How does the Carnivalesque serve to question social and political norms and rules?