In 1927 Aḥmad Shawqi, then recognized as “The prince of poets,” published a new book. The work was a play entitled “Maṣraʿ Kilyūḥātrā.” Within the Arabic literary tradition, The Death of Cleopatra was new in subject matter: the last days in the life of the Ptolemaic queen; and in its purported medium of expression: dramatic rather than lyrical poetry. An anonymous critical essay entitled “Analytic Views” (Nazarat Taḥliliyyah) was appended to the play. The author of the essay did not address the significance of the experimental form, but rather focussed on the choice of subject matter. Commenting on different European historical narratives on the life and death of Cleopatra, the author observed that:

This serious task was undertaken either by Roman . . . or “romanized” [historians]. These [authors] recorded the history of the shift [from Ptolemaic to Roman rule] in a fictive style, in which the Caesars of Rome got all the glory. The victorious amongst them is a hero, and the defeated a victim . . . while the poor Egyptian queen, Cleopatra—the last representative of the glory of the Ptolemies—. . . got nothing but a heap of accusations, sins, and curses.¹

This comment problematizes the historical sources for European representations of Cleopatra. The narratives of her history, the author states, are problematic because they are subjective. Most sources on the story of Antony and Cleopatra are Roman. They represent a Roman world-view. Consequently, the author suggests that their representations are not “fair,” but rather politically motivated.

It is the “unfairness” of these historical narratives, and their literary expressions, that opens the door for an Egyptian author to rewrite the story of Cleopatra:

Since scholarly research frequently reveals that this suspect history has many missing links, [and conveys] illusions that become facts, then should not the Egyptian author do justice to this falsely accused Egyptian [Cleopatra]? . . .

¹ Ahmad Shawqi, Maṣraʿ Kilyūḥātrā (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 1977) 115. This and all other translations from Arabic sources are mine. Bracketed numbers following quotations are keyed to the original texts in the Arabic Appendix.
think that it is even his responsibility to be just, at least until modern research establishes the truth of this old history. (Masra' Kilyubatìra, 116) [2]

By interweaving historical and fictive narratives, the author defends any departure in The Death of Cleopatra from a conceived historical truth. The evident goal is to rewrite the history of Cleopatra through a consciously subjective medium: a fictional narrative in dramatic form.

Numerous Arab critics have since suggested that Shawqi was either the author of the anonymous “Analytic Views” or that the essay was written with his encouragement or under his direct supervision. Many of Shawqi’s plays have essays appended that have the same generic title. The suggested purpose of these essays is to explicate to the reader the reasons behind choosing the themes and to comment on characters. The essay at the end of The Death of Cleopatra clearly states that the reason behind writing the play is to defend the “reputation” of the Egyptian queen.

What kind of European representations caused Shawqi to “defend” Cleopatra? Were these representations monolithic or “unfair,” and if so, what are the motivations behind them? Does Shawqi’s “corrective” effort present a “fairer” representation, or does it simply become an occidentalist mirror-image of an orientalist construct? Harold Bloom, the editor of a recent critical anthology on the character of Cleopatra in the English literary tradition, suggests that the Egyptian queen is one of the most appealing heroines to a Western author because:

Cleopatra—whether in Shakespeare, Dryden, or Shaw—does seem the creation of a man’s imagination, if only because the image of desire that activates and torments most men seems better represented by Cleopatra, as a literary character, than by anyone else.3

Bloom’s explanation of Cleopatra’s appeal restricts itself to viewing the Egyptian queen as a literary character. His statement immediately de-historicizes Cleopatra, reducing her to a universal embodiment of Western male desire. It further negates the tension and problematic interplay that exist between literary representations and historical narratives of her life. Bloom’s interpretation of Cleopatra’s character decontextualizes what Shawqi posits as a deeply contextual issue. Shawqi’s insistence on contextualizing the life of Cleopatra constitutes a rejection of Bloom’s depoliticization of the different European representations of the story of Antony and Cleopatra.