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Philip Hensher: Amis was neither a misogynist nor a homophobe

Could it be that Kingsley's old fascists have been proved right on a number of subjects?

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Professor Terry Eagleton, the pin-up of the far left, has been getting himself into the headlines again. This time, he has produced a new edition of an old synoptic book on ideology. In a new introduction, he ventures on to the subject of Martin Amis's recent statements on Islam, and, incidentally, on to Kingsley Amis.

Professor Eagleton's views are trenchant, to say the least, and more so when it comes to the Amis whom he will not encounter, either in the law courts or the senior common room of Manchester University. Kingsley Amis, Eagleton says, was "a racist, anti-Semitic boor, a drink-sodden, self-hating reviler of women, gays and liberals". That's quite a list, and one with worrying implications for the study of Professor Eagleton's own subject. One might gently suggest that the reading lists in English literature departments would be considerably shorter if they were pruned of drinkers and self-haters. But perhaps we might wonder about the justice of this personal arraignment by looking at one item in the list.

It had never occurred to me that Kingsley Amis was a reviler of gay people. Actually, one learns from Zachary Leader's superb biography that his gay brother-in-law was a welcome member of the Amis ménage for years on end. But perhaps Professor Eagleton was thinking of statements in Amis's work?

In fact, Amis's novels are remarkable for the consistency of their sympathy and interest in gay people's lives. The difficulty of the detective's life in *The Riverside Villas Murder* is very tactfully done, and with a clear implication that it would be a happier one in a different place or time. In that magnificent novel, *The Anti-Death League*, the homosexual and dipsomaniac officer is very definitely a sort of hero. There is a scene of extraordinary sympathy and depth in which he tries unsuccessfully to seduce a handsome private, and subsequently, with more luck, a waiter. There is nothing but warmth here.

There is a realistically happy, though discreet, homosexual couple in *Jake's Thing*. The ancient pair of homosexuals in *Ending Up* are ghastly, but no more so than everyone else, and there is no sense that they are ghastly because they are homosexual. In the late *Difficulties with Girls*, there is rather an unconvincing sub-plot about someone who thinks he may be gay, and there,

perhaps for the first time, is some expression of distaste for the specific sexual act; but I don't think any gay person is likely to take offence at the highly realistic portrayal of the late-60s manners and style of the gay couple in the book.

And Amis, it is known, undertook a novel in the 1980s with a gay narrator, abandoning it because, he respectfully said, he didn't know enough about the milieu. That is not the motive of a serious homophobe.

In short, there is very little merit in Eagleton's claim that Amis was a "reviler of gays". We might like to remind ourselves that Eagleton is a man who makes his living from the close reading of English literature. And was Amis really a "reviler of women" in that simple sense? For every Stanley and the Women there is a Bookshop Idyll; for every character like the mistress in *Girl, 20*, there is a Jenny from *Take A Girl Like You* or a Catherine from *The Anti-Death League*. Amis's position, as on most things, was much more nuanced and humane than his detractors suggest.

So why should someone like Eagleton make so demonstrably untrue a statement?

The sad truth is that after he wrote that Amis was a racist, the other terms in the denunciation were always going to follow. Amis was certainly noisily right-wing in his later years. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that he was somewhat anti-Semitic, and he certainly disliked left-wing politics of Professor Eagleton's brand enormously. The arraignment automatically follows; without, it appears, taking the trouble to find out what he thought on any given subject, Eagleton assumes that he must have reviled gay people from beginning to end.

We could be cruel, and point out that Marxists of Professor Eagleton's stamp have to justify their existence in a way they didn't when, for instance, I used to attend his lectures at Oxford in the early 1980s. Let us resist the temptation. We should probably treat them with the same respect and mild curiosity that we should of a man who still worshipped at the shrine of Woden.

We could wonder what it was, exactly, that raised the professor's ire to such a degree. It might well be that Kingsley Amis was, in his youth, a communist before undertaking an enormous volte-face; nothing is so hateful to the true believer as the renegade. Or could it possibly be that on a number of subjects – for instance the Soviet Union – those awful old fascists of Amis's lunch parties were proved right in the end?

That, I can see, would be absolutely maddening. But it ought to be perfectly possible to go on disagreeing with somebody, even in the strongest terms, while giving a faithful representation of what they actually thought. God knows, there is enough in what Kingsley Amis really did think to quarrel with.

There doesn't seem to be much excuse for adding to the list of thought-crimes with things which he ought to have believed, but didn't. Kingsley Amis was a big, humane novelist, interested in all manner of people very unlike himself. It is somewhat disgraceful for a professional reader of literature to try to turn him into such a straw man.

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