

Eve Bennett: Choosing the Wrong Family: Radicalisation and Gender in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

In her 2014 Slayage paper, Erin Giannini explored how the famous Whedon trope of the ‘chosen family’ is “subverted” in *Dollhouse*, as part of the programme’s critique of corporate culture. In my paper, I would like to extend this exploration to *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, a series which, I believe, interrogates the ‘chosen family’ motif in a somewhat different fashion. Perhaps informed by governmental and media discourses surrounding radicalisation, *AoS* seems concerned with showing that people who had troubled upbringings may be prone to recruitment by ‘bad’ chosen families, such as extremist groups, as well as to adoption by ‘good’ ones. The two sides of this paradigm are illustrated by the parallel trajectories of Daisy Johnson and Grant Ward, both characters whose yearning for “powerful father-figure[s]” led them to be radicalised in different ways: Ward ending up in Hydra and Daisy joining The Rising Tide before being recruited by S.H.I.E.L.D.

Through these two characters, *AoS* poses questions about choice and agency: Daisy was initially kidnapped by S.H.I.E.L.D. but then decided to work for them, while Ward was brainwashed by John Garrett. However, I will argue, the way their respective narratives develop has a gendered underpinning. Ward’s father-figure dies, allowing Ward to emulate and surpass him by becoming leader of the re-formed Hydra. Daisy’s narrative, on the other hand, mirrors that of many other young women in recent American television who, having been involuntarily given superpowers by a ‘bad’ father-figure, end up using them in the service of a group headed by a ‘good’ one. Although the possibility of Daisy’s joining a matriarchal community, *Afterlife*, is briefly raised, it is soon closed down by the revelation of her mother’s villainy. Nonetheless, it remains to be seen whether Daisy will one day fulfil Raina’s prediction by becoming a leader in her own right.