Intertextuality was an accepted mode of reading poetic works in the sixteenth century, stemming from the critical tradition centered on Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, with its famously ambiguous nature as a “fragmentary” gathering of individual works linked by a powerful central thematic logic, but that nonetheless defies univocal narrative interpretation. Madrigal books reflect the practice, common in books of *Rime*, of linking groups of individual works and at times (as in the *Canzoniere*) entire collections, through a system of references, such as titles, and mnemonic markers that can be variously located in the text, the music, or within particular text-musical, textural, and stylistic combinations. This system would have invited scrutiny, much as it did for literary works.

Composers and compilers of madrigal books had at their disposal a broad range of literary sources and musical elements with which to lead audiences through the exegetical process. Texts selected from the *Canzoniere*, the epic poetry of Ariosto and Tasso, from theatrical works such as *Il Pastor fido*, or from Marino’s lyric collections, carried their own contextual meanings. Organization by mode, final, system, clefs, voice combinations, and other musical devices could reinforce literary connections and provide the structural underpinnings of entire collections. And stylistic choices carried allusions to rhetorical modes or musical genres, powerful means by which to condition audience perceptions.

Sixteenth-century literary critics sought meaning for the *Canzoniere* in the “real” historical framework Petrarch’s own biography—fitting the work in a context external, but relevant, to it. This process, essential to humanistic philology, underscores much sixteenth-century literary criticism that originates in the same intellectual circles known for their cultivation of the madrigal. It stands to reason that, in the *ridotti* where madrigals were performed and discussed, and in the patronage circles within which much of the repertory originated, the conversation would have ranged beyond the single work, and would have included not only the literary and musical substance of the madrigals themselves, but their cultural significance—intellectual, political, and spiritual. Within such circles, the concept of “meaning” would have been highly fluid, resulting less from the fixity of the text than from the aspects of its construction that the audience chose to prioritize.