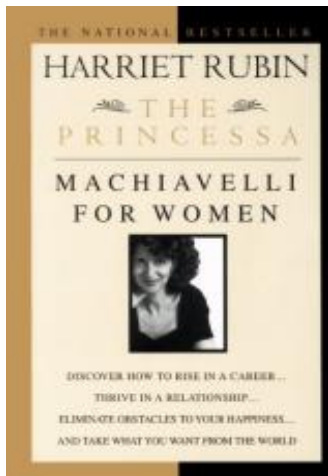


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# The Princessa: Machiavelli for Women

by Harriet Rubin

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## About the Book

In 1513, Niccolo Machiavelli wrote *The Prince* as a primer for young men of that starkly brutal era. At the core of every true prince, Machiavelli claimed, lay the wherewithal and the willingness to exercise power, preferably with ruthless cunning. A prince's life was enriched by conscience-free conflict. To the winner went all the spoils.

While also concerned with power, in its broadest sense, Harriet Rubin's *The Princessa* points the way to very different strategies to gain and maintain power. It begins with the premise that women, as a group, have historically been excluded from positions of power. In many cases, those *individuals* who have gained access are allowed in as tokens. Or they break through barriers using warlike tactics. Or they squirm in using a combination of compromise, cooperation, and negotiation. And they seem always to give so much more than they get. Well, not anymore!

*The Princessa* also works from the assumption that a woman's kind of power is very distinct from a man's. A woman's power is subtler, more nuanced. Instead of using conflict to annihilate, the princessa uses conflict to reshape alliances. Instead of competition, there is provocation. To a princessa, love is a kind of power and power is a kind of love.

Let there be no doubt--this book is not for the fainthearted. It is a book about conflict. A book about power--how to embrace it, use it, and gain what you want from it. No more compromise and negotiation. As Machiavella warns, "For a woman to triumph, she cannot play by the rules of the game. They are not her rules, designed to enhance her strengths. She has to change the game."

Machiavella shows how to ensure victory by adhering to one's principles, not to arbitrary rules or laws. She is unapologetic about the princessa's need to engage in conflict on her *own* terms.

Machiavella cuts a clear path, lighting the way with stories of princessas throughout history--Joan of Arc, the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, Scheherazade, Dian Fossey. *The Princessa* gives specifics--strategy, the why, and tactics, the

how--so that women can shape their lives according to *their* own designs. It cautions women to do more than merely "win." Instead, they must "best," and impart, as Machiavella adds, "a sense of Olympic-style triumph: an achievement that leaves losers not defeated so much as breathless, awestruck."

## Discussion Guide

1. Are princesses born extraordinary? Or do they become that way because of physical and psychological separation from their families?
2. In her discussion of strategy, Machiavella says that "every act contains an enemy's entire strategy." Examine highly publicized battles in light of such insight--perhaps Hillary Rodham Clinton's battle for national healthcare, Marcia Clark's battle to prove O.J. Simpson's guilt, or Anita Hill's battle to keep Justice Clarence Thomas off the Supreme Court. How does Machiavella's insight speak to these cases?
3. What can men and women do to make their young daughters princesses-in-training? Why does "prince" have positive connotations while "princess" has negative senses?
4. Do you agree with Machiavella that women have helped erect the glass ceiling that keeps them down, mistaking survival for success?
5. Machiavella speaks of "public love." Discuss its connection to power.
6. Discuss the difference between removing bad things from life and adding good things to it.
7. Think of the things you want. Are they, as Machiavella says, "the things you need"?
8. How does Machiavella's concept of "power anorexia" apply to your life or that of any women you know?
9. Discuss the ways in which sureness of judgment is a weakness.
10. Where's the difference between accepting the victim's role and using openness and vulnerability as a strength? Is there a danger of lapsing into a victim role when employing these tactics?
11. Machiavella advocated knowing and using your subtle weapons to turn the war in your favor. On the physical side these include clothes, hair, makeup, and tears. How have you used these in the past? Did it work? How might you use them now?
12. Have you ever cried in the office? Purposefully? Why? What was the result? Would you do it again?
13. Discuss the ways in which the author uses princess strategies, tactics, and subtle weapons to draw you in. Did you end up agreeing with her about issues on which you disagreed in the beginning?

14. Machiavella states that men crave disempowerment and are afraid of women. Do you see this in your relationship with a boss, partner, or husband?

15. Under what conditions will princessas dominate princes? When will the opposite hold true?

16. How does Machiavella make her case against the idea or wisdom of women sabotaging women? Have you ever been on the giving or receiving end of sabotage?

17. Discuss the idea of peace coming "in the thick of things, not as an aftermath."

18. Compose a joint communiqué from the field and send it to the author.

## Author Bio

*It's foolish to try to imagine the future when you can just create it.*

From the start, Harriet Rubin has clearly lived according to the credo quoted immediately above. She was educated at Rutgers University and Columbia University's School of the Arts, where she held a fellowship in poetry. She has written for the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and a number of women's magazines. In 1989 she founded Currency, a Doubleday imprint devoted to bringing new disciplines and perspectives to business leadership.

When asked if she considered herself a princessa, Rubin responded, "On good days I'm two thirds of the way there. And yet I often find myself falling back on the same old command and control mentality of Machiavelli just to score a win. But, of course, a quick and desperate win isn't a big win or a lasting win. It takes a lot of practice to become a princessa in the Machiavella school. And [yet] that's the only power that's effective."

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## **The Princessa: Machiavelli for Women**

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