Translator’s Note

This translation is based on the 1869 edition of La Petite Fadette published by Michel-Lévy Frères. Yet in three passages I prefer, for reasons explained in the notes, to use the words of the 1849 edition published by Michel-Lévy Frères. In La Petite Fadette Sand deliberately used language that was sometimes quite archaic and sprinkled with bits of dialect that would have seemed strange to her nineteenth-century readers unfamiliar with the Berry region of central France. I have tried to make my English a bit archaic, and I decided to include every now and then a word or expression of Berrichon dialect so that the reader of the English translation might also feel something of the heterogeneous nature of the original text, vacillating between standard French and Berrichon dialect. Many of my notes are taken from Martine Reid’s 2004 edition of La Petite Fadette, because she did such a fine job of collating Sand’s correspondence, autobiography, and writings about Berrichon folklore with the text of the novel.

Forms of address say a lot about relationships in French society. As a rule in the Barbeau family, the father and mother speak to their individual children using the tu form, whereas the children address each individual parent as vous. The mother speaks to her husband using the vous form, while the husband speaks to his wife using the tu form. Landry and Sylvinet use the tu form while addressing each other. Thus, at least in the beginning of the novel, the hierarchical relationships within the patriarchal peasant family are clearly manifested through the forms of address they use with one another, with one curious exception: in one tense paragraph in chapter 29, when old Barbeau and Landry are facing off with regard to Fadette, Barbeau addresses his son, simmering with anger, as vous, then reverts to the more typical tu.

Among adults from different families, the use of the vous form seems to be the rule, although it must be stated that the evidence is slight, given the paucity of dialogue between such persons (old
Caillaud and old Barbeau talking together in chapters 6 and 31; the Baigneuse from Clavières talking to Barbeau’s wife in chapter 31). The vous form also prevails in the conversations between Barbeau’s wife and Fadette, even in the days before the latter’s marriage to Landry. Among children and unmarried young adults from different families in this peasant community, the tu form takes precedence, with one notable exception: in chapter 21 Madelon uses tu for Fadette, who addresses her as vous; this serves as a stark reminder of their difference in social standing. As for talks between humankind and God, although traditional French prayers address God in the informal mode, Fadette uses the vous form when, in chapter 35, she prays for help in healing Sylvinet.

Aside from these fixed and often quite predictable usages, the novel presents, in addition to Barbeau’s curious change of pronoun in speaking to Landry, a few instances of oscillation between the regimes of tu and vous that are worthy of note. The interaction between Fadette and Sylvinet, who address each other as vous in chapters 27–39, despite the fact that these two young people have grown up side by side in a peasant community, first appears as an exception that confirms the rule. This atypical mode of address points to the strained relationship between the two characters, who have become rivals for Landry’s love. It is then all the more remarkable when, toward the end of chapter 39, Fadette promises to love Sylvinet like a twin, in essence replacing the twin who will become hers in marriage, and Sylvinet abandons his competitive stance and asks Fadette to use the tu with him, as a sign of a fundamental change in their relationship. On a more humorous note, Barbeau, helping Fadette count up her fortune in chapter 33, slips out of his use of vous with her in one paragraph, seeming quite overwhelmed by the sum of money before his eyes and the way it changes the prospects of this young unmarried woman. His brief and unexpected use of tu in speaking to Fadette highlights Sand’s ironic play on the pleasure that a view of cold cash excites in a peasant such as Barbeau. In chapters 14 and 15 Madelon and Landry generally address each other as tu, but sometimes as vous, without any discernible method or intent dictating the choice of regime. In chapters 9, 12, 18, 20, and 24, the tu form prevails in most of the exchanges between Landry and Fadette. There are, however,
a number of passages where one party or the other, or sometimes both together, switch fleetingly to the vous form. Some of these modulations can be explained, as at the beginning of chapter 9, by Fadette’s desire to mock Landry’s haughtiness toward her, but the greater number seem to resist explanation, obeying instead the rhythms of a mysterious ballet of fear and desire in the budding love between these two characters.

Among all these modulations from tu to vous and vous to tu, why did I choose to bring into my translation only the one at the end of chapter 39? I had no choice in that particular matter; otherwise, I would have had to rewrite Sand’s text where the change from vous to tu was explicitly discussed, and such rewriting was simply not an option. Some may find the introduction of a few “thees” and “thous” a quaintly charming little touch. So why not go on and translate throughout the novel all the second-person singular forms as “thou” and “thee”? I am of the opinion that so many “thees” and “thous” in the dialogue would constitute a stumbling block for the contemporary reader, unused to handling these forms on a regular basis, and that they might even act as a powerful distraction from the novel’s multiple and slippery messages. In addition to forcing English into an overly French mold, they would cast too much of an archaic feeling over a novel that speaks its modernity in so many other ways. The desire to curtail feelings of futility and frustration moved me in the same direction. While the meaning of some of the more easily explicable modulations in address might be backed up by other signifying features in the passage and thereby made somewhat redundant, what about all the questions raised in the minds of readers about the change of pronoun for reasons, if not totally inexplicable, infinitely debatable and ultimately undecidable? Furthermore, what about the translator’s dreadful burden of trying to explain what is not always susceptible to explanation? For all of these reasons I have chosen to follow the wisdom of the old adage: discretion is the better part of valor.