The Narrenschiff, a collection of witty and erudite satirical-allegorical caricatures, is one of the first secular European "bestsellers" following the invention of the printing press. In Wesleyan University's Davison Rare Books room sits a copy of the book, which is an authorized Latin translation by Brant's favorite pupil, Jakob Locher, and was printed in 1497 in Brant's native Strasbourg by the Catholic master printer Johann Grüninger. It is richly annotated, colored-in, and includes a handwritten list of French revolutionary figures in the first pages, presumably the product of a reader's desire to "update" Brant's encyclopedia of fools to his/her present day. In my thesis, I explore the kinds of questions this artifact evokes, and I do so with special attention to various theories of history.
that play a role in developing stories we tell about objects of the past. My inquiries revolve around the theoretical conditions of making an object of a past that is far gone and unreachable into an object with presence for our contemporary consideration and meaning making. I discuss Brant’s book as an example of allegory, and I discuss allegory as a means of writing and viewing history; I tell the story of the book’s printing in Strasbourg, and I investigate the implications of certain historiographic choices with regards to source material and evidence; I contextualize the book’s entrance into Wesleyan’s collection from the acquired library of past Wesleyan professor of Greek James Cook van Benschoten, and I examine the kind of enchantment, what I call archivization, we give to otherwise mundane objects by archiving them in “special” collections; finally, I talk about various uses of books, such as interpretation, adaptation, manipulation, annotation, and coloring-in, and I reflect on the conceptual difficulties of pinning down particular readers to particular times through their respective uses of the book. This thesis is a call to attention to readers and writers of history to be conscious of the philosophical significance of certain choices we make as historical beings. I propose we consider an allegorical perspective on the past that is dedicated to making meaning out of the past even in the face of the fact that the past always demands that those meanings are in some way deferred. The thesis is always grounded, one might even say anchored, by the artifact of the Ship of Fools in Wesleyan’s collection.